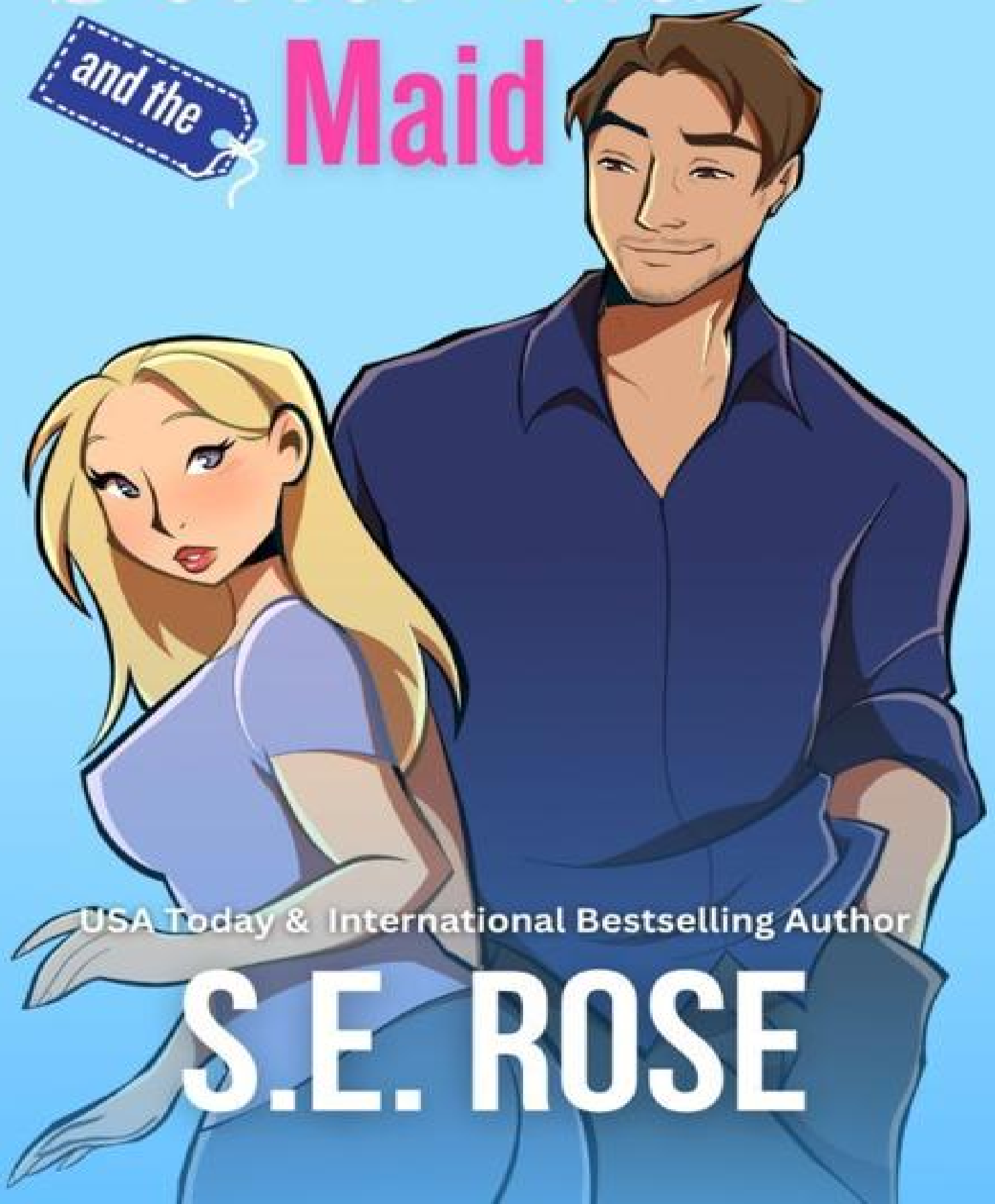


ONCE UPON A *Billionaire* ROM-COM SERIES  
BOOK 2



# The *Billionaire* and the Maid



USA Today & International Bestselling Author

# S.E. ROSE

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# **THE BILLIONAIRE AND THE MAID**

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**ONCE UPON A BILLIONAIRE ROM-COM SERIES**

**BOOK 2**

**S.E. ROSE**

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*To my sister who was the first person in my life who could annoy the hell out of me one second, and be my favorite person the next second, who knows what Pudgie Wudgie is, who better remember what we called our make-believe restaurant, who definitely remembers the coveted wooden rocker seat, who was my accomplice in sneaking candy from the junk food drawer, and who knows that we can't go in the back of the basement because there's most definitely a monster living there. I don't know how we ended up as normal as we are (which is questionable), but I have a feeling it's because we have each other.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

---

Ella

Once upon a time, there was a royal pain in my ass, and his name was Chase Marino.

I sigh as I read the tasks I should be adding to my cleaning list. It's my fault really. I begged Greta to give me this extra job. I needed the money, and these extra hours were only for a month as the Marino family prepares to host a holiday ball at their home. Somehow, I also got a list of additional cleaning duties in Chase Marino's apartment over the garage wing of the estate. And they are spelled out in a level of detail that indicates that Chase believes me to be the dumbest human to ever exist. I look down at the list again.

1. Clean the microwave. Make sure to take the glass plate out first. Make sure the clock is still set on the screen when you finish. Do not cook anything in the microwave.

2. Wash the sheets. Iron the sheets. Put the sheets back on the bed. Do not wash the down comforter. Do not wash the goose feather pillows. Do not sit on the bed.

My brain is already glazing over after reading only two items. This guy has issues, serious issues. I sigh again as I get to work, cursing the universe for giving me the world's best dad who would have easily paid for my college education, only to have it all ripped away from me before I could even drive. If Patrick Foster could see his daughter now. I shudder

at the thought. Not the fairy-tale ending he promised me as a child, that's for sure.

“Sorry, Dad, I'm trying here,” I mutter to myself as I adjust my headphones and blare my favorite song to get myself in a better mood while vacuuming. My brain begins to go over ideas as I clean. If I can just finish these extra few jobs, then I will hopefully have enough money to pay for my last college class. This means in less than six months, I could start my own graphic design and marketing firm. I'll still have to work for Greta for a while, but at least I could be pursuing my dream on the side.

I finish with the floors and walk over to the microwave. I roll my eyes as I stare at the list again. What a jackass! I decide to work as fast as I can. I don't want to have to interact with him and I have no idea when he'll be home. But I can already tell from the list that he'd be one of *those* people, just like my stepmom.

After cleaning the microwave to Mr. Perfectionist's specifications, I go to get the bedding out of the dryer. I pause in front of a shelf. There's a picture of Chase with a woman and they are both laughing. Is it his girlfriend? I've heard he's a player. But they seem genuinely happy in this photo. Maybe he's settled down? I smile sadly, wishing that could be me laughing with the love of my life. Fat chance that I'll meet Mr. Right while cleaning Mr. Perfectionist's apartment. I roll my eyes at my own ridiculousness. My friends are always telling me that I'll find my happily ever after one day, but who am I kidding? I look around and sigh. I need to get moving.

As I place the freshly washed and ironed sheets back on the bed and smooth out the high-thread count cotton, my phone buzzes. I glance down.

Gus: Drinks? Thirty minutes. Max's place.

I start to answer yes but then delete it. I can't afford drinks. I need to save my money. How do I get out of drinks with my bestie?

I watch three dots appear.



Gus: Drinks are on me. I got a raise!

I smile. How did I ever get lucky enough to find such a good friend?

Me: Congrats! Can't wait to hear all about it.

Gus: Or two...(winking emoji)

Me: You're incorrigible.

Gus: That's a big word. In-cor...whatever.

Me: (laughing emoji) Very funny, brainiac.

Gus: I'm only good with statistics.

Me: That's more math than I'll ever understand.

Gus: I mean, if you say so. It's not like I know high-level calculus. See you in a few.

I grin and stick my phone back in my pocket as I make my way back to the front room to gather my things. Gus is a data analyst for a big pharmaceutical company. He works from home and is the coolest person I know. We met when I arrived to clean his condo. To date, he's the only client who has ever requested I stay longer to drink with him on his balcony. Not that I minded. Gus has a condo in an exclusive development overlooking the cliffy shoreline south of town. I could only dream of living somewhere like that. But what's endeared him to me is the fact that not once has he ever brought up my lack of money or the fact that he makes way more than I do.

My thoughts are interrupted as the door to Chase's apartment flies open.

"What the fuck?" Chase murmurs as he nearly runs into me. I step back and my eyes lock on Chase's bare chest, and then his six-pack, followed by the "V" of muscles just above his low-hung gym shorts. Holy fuck! Chase Marino is in really, really good shape, like male-supermodel-good shape.

"Oh, s-sorry, Mr. Marino," I stammer as I look everywhere but into Chase's eyes. I feel the color spreading up my neck and cheeks.

"Are you finished?" he asks.

I sneak a glance at him. His brown eyes look annoyed.

And why does he smell so good? He looks like he just finished at the gym, yet he smells like...I sniff the air...pine trees and ocean breeze. He gives me a curious look and I feel my blush intensify.

“Yes,” I state. “Sir,” I add as I place my things in my rolling cart and go to open the door. His hand darts out and opens it for me.

“Th-thank you,” I sputter as I hurry through the threshold and to the elevator which takes me back to the first level of the estate. I press my back against the cool wood of the small elevator. Seriously, how rich do you have to be to have an elevator in your home? I purse my lips as I consider that for a long moment. Then the realization hits. I just made a total ass out of myself in front of Chase Marino, who oddly looked familiar. Those eyes...they remind me of...nope, not possible. Damn, I must need sleep.

I push the cleaning cart back to its closet and head out to my pink vintage Volkswagen Beetle. It was Gus's. He sold it to me for a few hundred dollars when he upgraded to a brand-new orange one. Mine is named Princess and his is named Duchess. He claims he misses his old one, but I highly doubt that since his has automatic steering. But I love my little car. She's perfect.

I drive toward our friend's restaurant and then realize I'm a little underdressed. Pulling into a far corner spot in the parking lot behind Main Street, I quickly look around. No people. I turn and scan the back seat of my car. It's tiny back there, but it's big enough to serve as a second closet. I find a cute dress, a jacket, and some flats. Quickly I change, making sure I'm not seen. I pull my hair out of the ponytail I've worn all day and brush it before pinning it up on the side and applying mascara and lip gloss.

“That'll have to do,” I mutter as I press my lips together.

I head inside and find Gus at the bar. He turns and sees me. I grin as he hops off the barstool and kisses my cheek. As he steps back, he motions with his finger for me to spin.

I roll my eyes but comply.

“Cute. Wherever did we get that?” he asks.

“I got it at Heather’s thrift store. It even had the tags on it,” I say with a wink, knowing that Gus loves a good bargain. It was probably not financially wise to spend all the tips I got from a customer last week on clothes, but I desperately needed a few new outfits. Thank goodness for the thrift store in town!

“Damn! Nicely done,” he replies as he holds his finger up for the bartender and orders us our usual cocktails.

“So, a raise, huh?” I ask as I play with the edge of the napkin in front of me.

“Yep. And an additional three days of vacation!” he says excitedly as he claps his hands.

“Where are you going?” I inquire, knowing that he probably already planned a trip.

“Well, I’m thinking about spending the holidays in London.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Wow! That’s...cool,” I say as I try to hide my disappointment. I had been hoping to spend time with him over the holidays since I’ll be all alone.

“I know, right?” he states as the bartender sets our drinks down.

I hold up my glass and we cheers.

“When do you leave?” I ask before taking a sip.

“I’m thinking the day before Christmas. But we’ll see. I may wait till after.”

I try to give my best supportive-friend smile because I don’t want him to know I’m bummed.

He elbows me. “Don’t look so glum. I’m sure Elisha and Isa will be around, and I think Bastian and Max are staying here. There will be plenty of people around. I’d bring you with me, but...” He trails off and looks sheepish.

It takes me a long moment to process why. “Wait! Are you going with that guy you’ve been talking to?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Maybe,” he answers, drawing out the “e” sound.

“Gus!” I admonish. “You better spill it! I need all the tea!”

He laughs and starts in on how he and Mr. Dating Website have not only been talking for four solid weeks, but they have also somehow randomly decided to spend the holidays in Europe. And by the end of his story, I’m less worried about him being murdered by a serial killer, and more excited that maybe he might have found the one. I want to feel happy for him, but deep down, I’m jealous as fuck. Will I ever find “the one”?

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Chase

“God damn it, Tate!” I growl as I slam a fist on my desk. I love my brother, but he can be the most irritating fucker.

“What? Dad said to order more leather, so I did,” he says, throwing his hands in the air and shrugging. I can see the rolling hills of Tuscany behind him. He’s not even in our office, he’s holed up at his villa overlooking his vineyard. I’d bet a billion dollars he’s got a woman keeping his bed warm as we speak.

“I thought we were going to focus on those textiles that I mentioned,” I mutter. I’ve slowly been trying to get my brother to see my vision, but he just keeps aligning himself with our father.

Tate would never admit it, but he’s Dad’s favorite. No matter how hard I try, I’ll never be good enough for our father.

I hear a voice in the background.

“I gotta run. Ciao!” he says with a smirk and the video call goes black.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. I glance toward my living room and eye a photo of me with my cousin, Laurel. She’s the only one in the family with common sense. Her dad should have taken over our company, but instead, he left it all behind to build boats. It caused a bit of a family rift, so we talk

as often as we used to. He currently resides in the south of France.

Laurel lives on a sailboat he built. She normally keeps it docked here in Storyview Falls, but she's sailed it down to the Caribbean for the winter and is now talking about staying there for a whole year.

I decide to text her.

Me: How is...where are you again?

I'm surprised when the video call pops up on my screen. I accept and see Laurel's blonde hair blowing in a gentle breeze. An island with palm trees is her backdrop with turquoise water between her and it.

"Why do you look so annoyed?" she questions as she slides into a hammock on the front of her sailboat.

I glare at her. "Because you're out there leading a life of leisure and I can't even get Tate to place a simple textile order," I complain.

She giggles and raises a glass of what looks like rum to her lips. My jaw clenches.

"Oh, stop it. First off, why are you bothering to ask Tate? We all know he's too busy getting his dick wet in some Italian pussy to even think about something business related. And second, I thought you were doing all of this on your own?" she asks, raising a questioning eyebrow at me.

I hate that she's right. I hate that she knows us this well. But let's be honest, I don't hate her at all. And she makes some valid points.

I scratch my jaw. My two-day-old stubble is starting to get itchy. "I hate that you're right," I admit.

She shrugs. "Well?"

I have had this idea for a new shoe line for our family's company for the last few years. The only one who really knows the entire idea is Laurel. I've told Tate little bits and pieces, but he neither cares nor thinks it is worth investigating. He's drunk Dad's Kool-Aid. He thinks we should stick to our

high-end women's high heels and high-end men's leather shoes.

"I have one shot at presenting this idea. The board meets the first week in January. I think they'll be announcing the next CEO and considering any major company changes for the year. If Dad backs me as CEO, then..." I trail off as I look at Laurel's face on the screen.

"You'll get it," she finishes my thought.

I nod.

"Chaseticles! That's awesome!" she exclaims, using what started as an annoying nickname when we were kids, but has somehow morphed into her term of endearment for me when we are alone.

"It is, but I need to be able to take the company in a new direction. I don't want to do this if I can't make the company what I want it to be. The idea of being shackled to old ideas and Dad's disapproving looks is more than I can bear," I admit.

"Chase, it'll be fine. Just tell Alana to order them," she says, referencing our VP of materials and design.

"It's not really her job. At least, not until it becomes an actual approved project," I add.

"But it will be when the board approves it," she encourages with a motion of her hand to drive home the point. She pauses and then puts the phone closer to her face. "Do not let Uncle Luca bully you. He has zero legs to stand on here. He's been as much of a fuckup as Tate. Hell, you only exist because he got your mom knocked up and then your grandfather forced him to propose. He's played it safe with the business for years. Stop playing safe. Take the company to the next level. You can do it! You have business sense that neither your dad nor brother have. Your dad is only hard on you because he sees you have what it takes, and honestly, I think he's jealous of you. You're the man he wished he could be."

She's not wrong about any of that, it's just a bitter pill to swallow. My family puts off this holier-than-now public

appearance, but behind closed doors, we are filled with bullshit drama. I know at the heart of it all, we do love each other, but damn, sometimes my family makes it hard to get along.

“You know, you don’t have to be like them. Don’t be like them!” she urges.

I grit my teeth. “I’m not trying to be like them,” I argue.

She rolls her eyes. “I call bullshit, but that’s for you and your therapist to work out.” I hear something off her starboard side.

“Just a minute!” she calls out to someone. She looks back at me. “I gotta go. You should come to visit soon. Sounds like you need a break.”

“Thanks, but I’m kind of busy at the moment. Maybe after the holidays,” I add as we disconnect.

I look out my window at the cottage in the distance. My grandfather chose to move out there. He has a property on the edge of town where he raises horses, but after my grandmother passed away, he said the house was too lonely, so he had a small villa built about a half mile from our home. It’s up on a hill and has views of the ocean. He goes over to his stables almost every day, but he mostly keeps to himself. His health has declined in recent years, and I know my days with him are numbered.

I decide to go visit him when I see smoke coming from his chimney. I push back from my desk and grab my winter coat as I take the elevator down to the main floor.

The doors open and I’m greeted by my mom.

“Oh, hey, Mom,” I say.

“Hello, Chase, dear,” she says as she leans up and kisses my cheek. “Dad wants to talk to you. I’m on my way out, so I said I’d pop by and let you know.”

I frown, wondering why he wouldn’t just call or text.

“OK,” I reply tentatively.



“He’s in the study,” she mentions as she saunters off toward the garage. She’s wearing her tennis clothes, so I have one guess as to where she is heading. I love my mother, but her way of coping with my dad and his many affairs is to escape to the comfort of her friends, and right now, her friends are into tennis. I shake my head sadly. And this is one of many reasons why I don’t date seriously.

I walk toward the main house and find my father in his study on a phone call. He motions for me to sit in one of the two wingback chairs in front of his oversized mahogany desk.

I sit and wait, tapping my finger on the smooth wood of the chair’s arm.

He hangs up and looks over at me. “The board meets in less than five weeks,” he states as if I wouldn’t know that.

I don’t fall for the bait, instead, I remain silent, waiting for him to get to the point.

“You still want to do this?” he asks as he motions around his office.

“Of course,” I reply.

“Why?” he asks.

I raise an eyebrow. What the hell is he playing at? Everything my father does is calculated, but right now, I don’t understand his endgame.

“You know why,” I respond.

He clasps his hands in front of him and gives me a pointed look.

I want to groan. This man is a pain in my ass.

“Because it’s my birthright. Because it’s all I know. Because I’ve been working for this since I was a teenager,” I state.

He nods as if those answers are acceptable.

“You know, there’s more to it than just that. Being the head of the Marino Shoe Company means being a figurehead for a

multi-billion-dollar corporation,” he points out, again, as if I’m an ignoramus.

“What’s your point?” I question, prodding him to finish his thought.

“You need my support to get the position,” he states and suddenly I’m dreading what he’s brought me in here for. He pauses. “You need to get a girlfriend. No more of this playing-the-field thing. You need to change your reputation as a rich playboy. The company needs you to be taken seriously. I want a woman by your side at the ball. And not one of your bimbos,” he adds.

I glare at him. “I don’t have any *bimbos*,” I growl. I want to add, unlike you, but I won’t stoop to his level.

“Fine, one-night stands, friends with benefits, whatever the hell you boys call these ladies that I see you with at events. I want you to have a real girlfriend with you. Or at least a real date, someone you are actually interested in. Hell, someone you might want to marry,” he says.

“Dad,” I start, but he holds up his hand.

“It’s non-negotiable,” he says.

“How the hell am I supposed to fall in love with someone in less than four weeks?” I ask because I’m pretty sure this man is delusional.

“I didn’t say you had to be in love,” he replies.

“Oh. So, you want me to be more like you, then?” I ask, my jaw tightening with each word I speak.

Dad doesn’t like my tone and he returns my glare. “Do not test me, Chase. You won’t like what happens. Now, get the fuck out of my office. I have things to do,” he snarls, his voice cold.

I stand and leave, not bothering to question the Great Luca Marino. How the hell can my father and grandfather be so different? I suddenly wish Tate was the oldest, and next in line to run the company. Because if my father is going to dictate the rest of my life by holding things over my head, I’d rather

be free of these chains. I glance out the window as I leave the office and see my grandfather's villa in the distance again, remembering that I was heading out there a few minutes ago. Fuck. I can't let him down. He's the only person who truly gets me. And this company is his life.

I step into the hallway, closing the door behind me. I lean against it.

"Where the hell am I going to find a girlfriend in less than thirty days?" I ask myself out loud.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Ella

Greta smiles as she sits across from me. We're having coffee at my friend Elisha's café on Main Street.

"So, how's the Marino estate? You know all those extra hours are to help the staff prepare for the charity holiday ball they are holding there at the end of the month," she points out.

I nod. "I've heard that," I say as I wonder why I'm cleaning Chase's apartment when I should be spending more time cleaning the silver and fine china. But then I think of the grand ballroom at the estate, and I sigh as I put my head in my hands, my elbows propped on the table. "Isn't it romantic? I mean, a ball. I can't believe people still go to balls."

Greta rolls her eyes. "Snap out of it, Ella. It's a rich-people thing. And besides, if you want to go so badly, then go."

My eyes widen and my hands drop. "I can't go. I don't even have an invitation."

"Really? I'm surprised. Isn't your stepmom always mingling with that crowd at the tennis club and country club and all the other clubs?" Greta asks as Gus walks into the café, giving us a wave.

I shrug. "I don't know. She hasn't said anything."

"When was the last time Nancy Foster told you anything," Greta states.

“I...well, never,” I admit. I hate that she’s right. I hate that my stepmom is, well, my stepmom. If only my father had known the witch she truly is.

“Exactly. You should just ask her. Maybe she has an extra ticket. Heck, maybe I can get you a ticket,” Greta suggests. I want to laugh because the likelihood that Nancy would give me an extra ticket to the town’s event of the year is as likely as me winning the lottery.

“Yeah, maybe. And thanks, but what would I even wear? I don’t own anything like that,” I declare with a sigh.

Gus sits down and looks between us. “Own anything like what?”

Greta leans in toward Gus conspiratorially. “A ball gown.”

“Oh, do tell,” Gus prods as he looks at me.

“You two have got to stop. I don’t have an invite to this ball. Even if I did, I have nothing to wear. So why are we even talking about it?” I ask.

“Well, if we do get you an invite, come see me. I may have something that would fit you perfectly,” Greta assures me.

“Greta, I—”

“Just promise me,” she urges.

“Fine, if by some miracle I get an invite to this ball, which is totally not going to happen, I will come to see you about something to wear,” I promise. I want to ask Greta how she thinks she’ll get a ticket, but I decide she must be hopeful wishing or maybe she knows someone, she does run in circles with some of our town’s wealthier residents.

“See? Was that so hard?” she asks with a smirk.

I roll my eyes.

“So, how is the job over there?” Greta asks again.

Shrugging, I take a sip of coffee to give myself a moment to consider her question. How is it going? Well, I haven’t run into Chase Marino again, so that’s...good. I don’t have to

smell his cologne or view his six-pack after he works out or wish I was that girl in the photo.

“Hello, earth to Ella?” Gus says as he waves his hand in front of my face.

I set my mug down. “It’s fine,” I manage.

Gus rolls his eyes. “Fine? What does that even mean?”

Greta pats Gus on the shoulder. “It means, it’s fine,” she says with a laugh.

I look over at Gus. “How do you think it is? I’m cleaning. I’m the maid. It pays the bills. And it’s letting me get the degree that I want. So, yeah, it’s *fine*.”

“Well, I can cheers to that. I can’t wait for you to get this degree, so you don’t have to clean any longer.” He pauses and looks over at Greta. “I mean...she has talents beyond toilet cleaning.”

Greta gives him a pointed look. “First, Gus, there’s nothing wrong with cleaning. I’ve done it for years. It’s an honorable and important profession. Second, I agree. Our Ella needs to be doing more than cleaning toilets, amongst other things because cleaning isn’t her true calling.”

“I promise, I will be doing other things, soon,” I say, trying to manifest my future.

Gus leans in toward me. “So, Chase Marino, is he as hot as everyone says? I’ve never seen him up close.”

I nearly spit out the sip of coffee I just took. “He’s, uh, yeah, I guess.” I feel my cheeks pinken. “I’ve only seen him once.”

“Oh? And was he smokin’ hot?”

I giggle. “I suppose. I mean, he does have like a full six-pack. Or maybe eight? Wait. How many muscles are down there?” I ask as I glance at my belly.

Gus pats my hand. “We need to take this party over to the restaurant. I need a drink before you describe exactly what those abs look like.”

I bite my lip. Gus just bought me drinks a few days ago, and that was celebratory. He can't possibly be offering to pay again, and this coffee was almost five dollars. I do mental math, but Gus just gets up and holds out his elbow.

"Come on. If you describe abs, I'll buy you a glass of wine," he insists.

I glance back at Greta, and she waves her hand toward the door. "As much as I'd love to hear about abs, I'm meeting a potential client in thirty minutes. You two enjoy," she insists with a warm smile. I turn back and walk over to her, wrapping her in a hug as she stands.

"Thanks, Fairy Gretamother," I whisper.

She laughs. "Anytime, sweetie."

I give Elisha a wave and head back over to Gus. We link arms and begin the two-block walk to Max's restaurant.

Max is there tonight and pulls me into a hug, giving me a cheek kiss before I'm even through the threshold. He holds the door open for us. "Come in, come in. It's freezing out there," he says.

"We're just at the bar tonight, Max," Gus explains as we walk toward the sleek black bar along the far side of the room and take our usual stools.

"You two enjoy. Try the drink special, Kevin came up with it," he says, mentioning his new bartender, a younger guy who moved to Storyview Falls a few months ago.

"Will do," we respond simultaneously.

"Jinx," we state.

"You're such a dork," I say with a giggle as I hang my purse on the hook under the bar.

"You wouldn't have it any other way," he states. He holds up a finger. "Kevin, two specials."

Kevin nods and gets to work, while Gus turns back to me. "Now, abs. I need details."

The next two hours turn into Gus peppering me with questions about Chase as if I'm some sort of Chase Marino expert.

"There's really nothing else to say," I finally declare. "Seriously, I only see his apartment once a week. It's not that exciting."

He waves off my indifference, but his hand stops mid-wave. His eyes are fixed on the front door. I turn and find my stepmom waiting to be seated.

Gus's hand starts motioning her over before I can stop him.

"What are you doing?" I hiss under my breath as I feel my heart begin to pound in my chest. My stepmom has always intimidated me and I'm not in the mood to deal with her.

"Putting her in her place," he says without moving his lips. "Nancy, so good to see you," he greets as he stands and kisses her cheek.

"A pleasure as always, Gus. You may be the only thing Ella got right," she says, and I see Gus clench his jaw.

"Well, we were just discussing the Marinos' holiday ball," he says.

"Oh?" my stepmom replies.

"Are you going?" he inquires as if there's a chance she isn't going. Nancy Foster made it her life's goal to run in the same circle as every wealthy person in town. My father certainly had money, not like the Marinos, but enough and she's invested her inheritance. I just wish she'd have given me some of it.

"I am. I just got an invitation." I see her shoulders tense, and she turns to me. "Are *you* going?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Well, I'm sure most maids don't. I'm so sorry, Ella, but I only have enough for the girls and me. I hope you'll understand?" Her words bite at what's left of my desire to have a mother-daughter relationship.



“Oh, Ella’s going,” Gus announces as if it’s obvious that I would be invited.

My eyes widen. “Oh, uh, right,” I stammer.

My stepmom eyes us suspiciously. “Well, I guess I’ll see you there, then. You two have a wonderful evening. I must be going. I’m meeting a friend.”

She saunters off and Gus looks over at me with a sheepish grin.

“Gus!” I whisper-yell as I slap his arm.

He shrugs. “We’ll find you a ticket.”

I glare at him as Kevin sets down our next round of drinks. “Enjoy, guys,” he says with a smile.

“Thanks,” we both answer without looking at him.

“Gus, seriously, now I’ll have to watch Nancy gloat when I don’t show up,” I groan as I grab my drink and take a big gulp of it. I pause because that shit is good.

Gus mirrors me and sips his. “Damn. That *is* good. How is every cocktail he makes this good?”

I nod. “OK, back to your fuckup. What were you thinking?”

Gus places a hand on my shoulder and stares into my eyes. “We are going to figure out a way to get you into that ball.”

I stare back. “What do you think, Chase is just going to waltz up to me and ask me to go with him?”

Gus purses his lips. “I mean...that’s not a bad idea.”

I give him a pointed look. “You’re impossible. Chase Marino is way out of my league and he’s a total playboy. Not happening. Ever.”

But inside, I can’t help but wonder what that would be like...dating Chase Marino. I finally tell myself to shut up because that’s *never* going to happen.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Chase

“Laurel, where the fuck am I going to find a girlfriend in less than thirty days?” I ask as I rub the back of my neck which has been in knots since I left my dad’s office. Even my visit with my grandfather didn’t ease my tension. I didn’t even mention it to him because I didn’t want to upset him. And I can’t imagine he’d be happy with my parents’ ideas on rebranding my image with a girlfriend.

“I don’t know,” she replies. I watch as she spins her blow-up unicorn in a circle.

“How am I supposed to have a serious conversation when you’re literally riding a unicorn?”

She giggles. “You’re sooo boring, Chaseticles. Seriously, just hire someone,” she adds.

This version of Laurel drives me crazy. “Right, and what if the press finds out?”

She sighs. “Then, have Tate find you someone.” She pauses. “What about one of your old hookup buddies? What’s that one’s name...Kelly, no, Sandy, no...” She trails off as she taps her cheek, deep in thought.

“Tiffany?”

She smiles. “Yeah, that’s the one. She’d probably pretend in exchange for a trip somewhere or some diamond bracelets.”

I groan. “Her parents play tennis with my mother. That would be bad,” I explain.

“Oh, right. I don’t know. I mean, what about an escort service? I have this friend—”

“No. Just no. I’m not doing that.” I have to draw the line somewhere. I’ve never hired a date before and I’m not about to start now. If only I could find someone who felt obligated but also wasn’t trying to get with me.

“Well, you’ll figure it out. You always do,” she says as she twirls around in the water.

“I’m going to go. You’re making me motion sick,” I declare as I try to look anywhere but at my screen.

“You are such a party pooper,” she whines in her exaggerated annoying voice, the one she uses when she wants me to do something.

“Later, Laurel-loo,” I say.

“Byyye,” she says as she disconnects.

I stare at my desk. I need to go to my office in the city. I’m getting stir-crazy out here in Storyview Falls. My phone rings and I glance down. It’s Ward Smith, my assistant. The one thing I love about Ward, he’s one hundred percent all business all the time. He’s also hilarious and extremely trustworthy. In fact, I trust him more than I trust my immediate family. I love my family even with all their quirks and ridiculousness, but aside from my grandfather, I have massive trust issues with them. Or at least that’s what my therapist tells me.

“Hey, Ward,” I say as I place the call on speaker so I can scroll my email.

“The samples are wrong,” he announces in a strained voice.

“What?” I yell as I look at the email from the vendor where Tate had allegedly ordered my textiles.

“They just came in and I checked them. You wanted a gray-on-gray muted print, right?”

“Yes,” I reply as I look for the confirmation email from Tate.

“Well, we got green-on-green,” he says blandly.

I find the email and click on it. The email itself looks fine, but when I open the attachment, I find the error. Damn it, Tate! He finally orders my textiles and he gets it wrong.

“He ordered the wrong thing. Shit,” I grumble, cursing myself for having this conversation when Tate was trying to leave for dinner.

“It’s not the end of the world. I’m glad they sent the sample first. It’ll push us back a week, but you should still be able to get the prototype shoe done before your presentation,” he encourages.

“Can we expedite it?” I ask as I silently pray to the textile gods that they can deliver it quickly.

He’s quiet for a moment. “Just did that. I’ll call our contact over there when we get off. She’ll help us out. She owes me a favor anyhow. Maybe we can get it in less than a week.”

I laugh, suddenly feeling slightly better. Thank God Ward always has favors to call in. How he does it, I don’t know, but I’ll take it.

“Thanks,” I reply as I stare out my window. I can see into the formal dining room. The maid is in there mopping the floors and she’s clearly jamming out to something as she provocatively moves her hips.

“I’ll call her now. If there’s any other issues, I’ll let you know,” he says.

“Yeah, OK,” I manage as I keep watching the mesmerizing woman. He hangs up, but I can’t keep my eyes off her. She’s using the mop as a microphone. I wonder what she’s singing. Hell, I wonder if she can sing? There’s something so familiar about her. Like I’ve known her my whole life. But that’s impossible. I probably just recognize her from cleaning my apartment. I frown. It was her in here a few days ago, wasn’t it? I squint trying to see her better from across the courtyard between my wing and that one.

She leans over to pick up something and a shapely ass points in my direction.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath as my imagination dances around images of gripping that round flesh as I pound into her from behind. I feel my dick starting to come to attention as I let my brain wander through the possibilities of an encounter with her. Her lush breasts bounce as I thrust into her slick heat. Her pink lips fall open as she comes undone beneath me. Her fingers grip me as she takes me in her mouth. A blonde hair escapes her bun. Her hand comes up to brush it aside.

I want to do that. I want to push her hair away from her face. She’s naturally beautiful. Her big, blue eyes glance around the room as she sets down the mop and picks up a dust rag. I only know they are blue because I viewed them up close when I came into my apartment and saw her cleaning. The delicious way her cheeks pinkened under my gaze.

A knock on my door has me quickly adjusting myself and taking a sip of water. “Come in,” I say after a minute of composing myself.

“Are you coming to brunch tomorrow?” Mom asks. I look up to see she’s just come from the tennis club. I swear she has lived there recently.

“Brunch?” I ask, frowning as I stare at the open calendar on my desk. And there it is. Brunch with Rick and Steve Finch. They own a shoe store that buys from us.

“Oh, uh, yes. I have it on my calendar,” I state.

“Are you...bringing anyone?” Mom asks, her eyes hopeful.

I sigh. “No, I don’t plan on bringing anyone, Mom.”

She frowns. “But Dad—”

“I know. I can’t just produce a woman out of thin air, now, can I?” I reply curtly as I glare at her.

She sighs and sits down on a leather sofa. “Chase, Dad and I want the best for you. It’s only because he wants you to have

it all.”

I want to laugh. Like you? A husband who cheated on you and fake friends? I have to bite my tongue literally, so I don't say the words out loud. As much as my mom has faults, she doesn't deserve that from me. She's been a good mom. And I've been informed that my father has ceased cheating on her this past year. Jesus, my family is more complicated than an international contract negotiation.

“Mom, I...I'm going to set up some dates this week when I have time.”

She relaxes and gives me a genuine smile which is rare these days. “That's great, sweetheart. I'm sure you'll find someone soon.”

I clench my jaw. Soon? Sure, it's just like buying a car. I'm sure I'll find the perfect wife in the next few days. I mean potential wives just fall out of the sky like raindrops, right?

Mom gets up and walks over to me, leaning down, she kisses my cheek. “I'll see you later.”

“Bye, Mom,” I grumble as she leaves, closing my door behind her.

I glance back over at the dining room window, but the maid is gone. I'm left to only my imagination as I free my cock from my pants and grip it, squeezing it roughly as I stroke myself to completion with visions of a blonde lying beneath me.



It's been an hour since I decided running on the treadmill was a better way to get over my maid infatuation. It seems to have worked. I've listened to two podcast episodes on the art of global market expansion. I grab a clean towel and put it around my neck as I pull a bottle of water out of the small refrigerator. I down the water and toss it in a recycle bin by the door as I walk out and slowly make my way through the house toward my apartment. It's buzzing with activity. The staff

seems to be deep cleaning every last square inch of this place or at least all the parts that guests would visit. You'd think we were having royalty over for the ball. I tilt my head as I try to recall the "who's who" list of attendees my mom had rattled off at dinner the other night. I'm fairly certain there was no royalty on it.

My phone buzzes and I look down.

Ward: New samples arrived. (photo of samples)

I click on the photo and enlarge it. Yes! It looks even better than I thought.

Me: Perfect. Order it and start the staff on the rest of the prototype.

Ward: On it. Should be ready in a few days.

Me: Great. That must have been some favor you called in.

Ward: Guilt is the greatest way to get a favor...(winking emoji)

Me: It sounds like there's a story there.

Ward: Oh yeah, there is, but that is best told over beers. Next time you're in the city, we'll go out and I'll tell you all about it.

Me: (laughing emoji) Deal.

Ward: You find a date yet for this ball?

I wince. I shouldn't have unloaded that albatross on Ward, but after Tate laughed at me and Laurel suggested I hire someone, Ward seemed the logical choice of reason.

Me: Nope.

Ward: Well, keep your eyes peeled. It's ridiculous but I don't want you losing this over the lack of a girlfriend. Your dad is whack!

I laugh.

Me: That he is.

I start walking down the grand hall that connects the ballroom to the dining room and parlor. It's lined with

expensive artwork and side tables with priceless artifacts. And...the maid. There she is again, dancing around and shaking that ass that I admired earlier. And fuck, my cock wakes back up.

I watch for a long moment, ducking into the entryway of the dining room so she doesn't see me. She's even cuter up close now that I have more than a few seconds to view her. I watch her spin around and her hip juts out and right into the corner of a side table. I watch in semi-horror as an antique vase wobbles. She's exactly one second too late as she reaches for it. It goes crashing to the floor and she goes rigid, her eyes darting in every direction.

After a moment, she sinks to her knees as she tries to pick up the pieces. What is she thinking? There's no way of salvaging that. Well, probably not. It's in at least ten pieces. I pause as suddenly a plan starts to evolve in my brain. *Guilt is the greatest way to get a favor.* Ward's words dance around in my mind. I look back over, watching her place a call on her phone. Maybe I just solved my little problem after all.



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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Ella

“Oh, shit!” I whisper as I sink to my knees. I pick up a piece of the vase and grimace. How can I possibly salvage this?

I pull out my phone and call the only person I can think of...Gus.

“Ella?” he answers in a surprised voice.

“Gus, I’m so totally screwed,” I whisper. “I just broke a vase and I’m pretty sure it’s worth more than my life.”

“I highly doubt that,” he answers. “Where are you?”

“The Marinos’,” I answer as I look around, making sure no one is here.

“Oh, fuck. Yeah, it probably is worth more than both you and me,” he replies. I can hear the sympathy in his voice and my bottom lip quivers.

I glare at the ground since Gus isn’t here. “Thanks a lot. What do I do?” I ask in desperation as I stare at the pieces of the probably priceless artifact.

“Glue it back together. By the time they notice, they’ll just figure it was a guest at the ball or something.”

“Right, a guest breaks their vase and then goes and finds glue and glues it back together without anyone seeing them?” I question with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, probably not. I mean, are there cameras there?” he asks.

I frown and whip my head around again, looking in all directions. Surprisingly, none are here, or at least not pointed at me.

“No,” I reply.

He sighs. “Send me a photo. Maybe I can find a replica or something,” he states.

“You’re a lifesaver,” I whisper. I take a photo of a similar one across from me and then of the pieces on the floor and send them.

“Got them?” I ask.

“Yep. Damn, that’s some sort of Roman empire shit. I’ll see what I can do. Can you find something to put there in the meantime?” he asks.

“I...don’t know. I’ll try to find something and clean up these pieces,” I say. “Thanks, Gus.”

“You owe me,” he says dryly and hangs up.

I look back down at the pieces and my phone buzzes.

Gus: Shit. That vase looks expensive. I don’t even think we can afford a replica. Maybe I can find something. Give me a few minutes.

I want to cry.

Me: Thanks. Shit! I have no luck at all.

Gus: You have luck...bad luck.

Me: Thanks a lot. That makes me feel so much better.

Gus: Anytime.

Looking back down and sighing, I begin sweeping all ten pieces into a bag and place them on my cleaning cart. I look around nervously, slowly turning because I feel like someone is watching me. A shiver runs up my spine as I spin. And then, I lock eyes with none other than Chase Marino.

I freeze as I look at him. He's leaning against a door. How long has he been there? What's that look on his face? Is he going to get me fired? Is he mad? Is he amused? Fuck. I can't read him.

He doesn't speak as he takes a giant step forward and then another. He keeps walking until he's about two feet away. When he stops, I'm forced to look up at him. I swallow my nerves as I try to straighten my back to my full height. I realize upon doing this, that I'm way shorter than Chase. So much for feeling more in control because now that I'm at his chest's level, I get a whiff of his cologne. Even in my state of nerves and fear, my lady parts react. What. The. Fuck?

"Good afternoon, Mr. Marino," I say politely, feeling a little proud of myself for keeping my shit together. My voice barely wavers.

He still doesn't answer. Instead, he reaches over my shoulder and picks up the bag of vase pieces.

I bite my lip. Damn it. I'm so screwed. I can never pay back that vase's value. Not if I worked one hundred years.

I watch as he opens the bag and pulls out a single piece, examining it in the dim light of the hallway.

"It seems you had an accident," he says slowly before placing the piece back in the bag.

"Y-yes, s-sir," I stammer, lowering my eyes. I feel my cheeks turning red and I do my best to not cry. Gus was right. I do have bad luck, the worst luck.

"I should tell my mother. It's one of her favorites," he says, and my eyes fly up to meet his. Is he joking or is he serious?

"I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention. I didn't mean to bump the table. It was an accident," I reply, the words come out in a rush and run together. I feel tears threaten and I blink rapidly to keep them at bay.

He tilts his head to one side as he studies me. My phone buzzes in my pocket and he glances down at it.

"You going to get that?" he asks.

“I...uh...” I reach into my pocket. It’s a text from Gus.

Gus: Fuck. You are so screwed. Not Roman. Quin Dynasty. It’s worth close to a million. You can buy knockoffs but...fuck, they aren’t even close to that. I’ll see if I can find a good replica that won’t require us to take a loan out. Sorry.

I shudder and my hand trembles as I place the phone back in my pocket.

“Important message?” Chase asks, his eyebrow rising slowly. Who has control of their eyebrows like that? What the hell?

I shake my head. I’m fairly certain that all the blood has drained from my face.

“You don’t look so well,” he states. I feel my legs go weak and my vision begins to blur.

“Fuck,” I hear Chase mutter as everything goes black.

I’m not sure how much time passes before I’m aware of being carried and then laid down. My eyes flutter open as something cool presses against my forehead.

Chase’s worried face hovers over me. It takes a second to realize he’s holding a cold, wet cloth to my face.

“Hey,” he says, his deep voice laced with concern.

“Did I...” I trail off as I try to remember what happened. I blink up at him as he stares down at me.

“You passed out,” Chase explains, pulling back the cloth.

I start to sit up but sway. Chase wraps an arm around me and leans me back against the sofa where I’m apparently lying.

“Easy,” he murmurs.

“I...I’m so sorry,” I whisper as I remember what had just happened.

Chase sighs and sits down next to me.

“What if I don’t tell? What if...you do me a favor and I’ll get a replica made. There’s a matching one in that cabinet over

there. Mom will never notice it's missing," he says as he motions to a china cabinet in the far corner of the sitting room.

I sit up a little and eye him suspiciously. Did he just say "favor"?

"W-what?" I manage as I suddenly feel very awake.

"I need...a fake girlfriend," he states as if that's some normal request. Like, can you iron my pants or deep clean the rugs in my apartment?

"I'm sorry, what?" I ask in confusion, wondering if I misheard him due to some minor concussion I received from my fainting spell.

He clears his throat. "You know the holiday ball, right?"

I nod. Does this man think I live under a bridge with no concept of the world around me?

"Well, my father's announcing that I'm taking over the company at it and then the board makes an official vote the following week," he starts.

"I'm not following," I say as I try to make sense of his words.

"My father is...old fashioned. He also thinks I'm...not very serious about anything," he tries to explain, only his words are causing me more confusion.

"So, you want me to pretend to be your girlfriend?" I ask, each word coming out slower than the last.

"Just until the board votes," he confirms.

I frown. "But your mother's seen me. She'll know that I'm the maid," I state as if the problem of who I am and what I do is obvious. Why would Chase Marino date his maid publicly?

He rolls his eyes. "I guarantee my mother wouldn't recognize you in a lineup." He slowly reaches out and pulls my hair out of the tight bun that I keep it in. It falls over my shoulders.

"There," he says as he looks down at me. "I can have some clothes sent over. If you put on a little makeup and leave your

hair down, she won't notice."

I give him a pointed look. "Your staff will." What in the Hannah Montana nonsense is going on here?

He purses his lips. "Tell them we met on Main Street somewhere, and I don't know that you clean homes, so please don't say anything. And if that doesn't work, then I'll buy their silence," he offers.

I stare at him dumbfounded.

"And if I don't agree?" I ask.

"Then, I'll tell my mother and your boss. That's an expensive vase to have to replace," he says coolly.

It's official. I want to murder him. "Is that a threat?" I whisper-yell, starting to feel more angry than upset.

Shrugging, he leans forward and gives me a sly grin. "Please do me this favor. It's only for a month. It'll be a few dinners, the gala, maybe a lunch, and then you never have to see me again."

I glare at him. "You do know that I live in Storyview Falls, right? It's not like I'm some magic person that'll disappear at the stroke of midnight."

"I know...I...I need this. I mean, I want this, and I don't want to lose it over some technicality," he explains. There's a bit of a pleading look in his eye. Wait. Does he need me to be his fake girlfriend more than I need him to shut up?

I don't like this. I don't like anything about it. I contemplate his offer. If I say no, will his family make me pay to replace the vase? Greta's company is insured, maybe the insurance would cover it, but then Greta would probably fire me, maybe. I certainly wouldn't want to cause her to have a higher premium. Or what if her company goes under because of me? Either way, I won't be able to finish this last semester. I'm so close. I just have to take some exams and one little winter semester class. It'd be unbearable to get so close to my dreams and lose them all over a stupid vase. If I say yes, then what? He already explained what it entails. I narrow my eyes.

“No sex. This would be no more than six dates, all with other people around. And you never say a word about the vase. It goes to your grave,” I counter as my mind spins, trying to think through this completely crazy situation.

His jaw clenches. “I would never...I accept your counteroffer,” he states from behind his clenched teeth.

I can’t believe I’m doing this. This is insane. Gus would kill me. Every fiber of my being says this is a bad idea, but I’m backed into a corner. It’s checkmate. There’s no way out but forward.

I hold out my hand, and he takes it in his. I jerk back a little as I swear I feel an electric shock. He grips my hand tightly, but his eyes widen slightly, and I wonder if he felt that too.

“Deal, then,” he finally manages.

“Deal,” I say in a low voice as I pull my hand away.

He puts his hands in his lap and looks into my eyes. “Your phone,” he states, motioning with his finger.

I frown as I reach for it, and he takes it. He turns it so I can open the screen. And then he proceeds to text himself.

“There. Now we can communicate,” he says as he hands it back to me.

I stare down at the message.

Me: Your fake girlfriend.

I roll my eyes. He stands and then turns.

“I’m Chase, by the way,” he says as he holds out his hand again.

I slowly stand and take his hand. This time there’s no current, just warm skin. “Ella...Foster,” I reply.

“Nice to meet you, Ella Foster.” He frowns as if remembering something and then shakes his head a little.

“What happens next?” I ask.

He turns as he walks toward the door. “You meet my parents. Tomorrow, but first, we need to get a backstory. I’ll pick you up at seven. Text me your address.”

And just like that, he disappears into the hallway, leaving me standing with my mouth open. What the hell just happened? My phone buzzes again and I pull it out.

World’s Best Boyfriend: I’ll have a dress sent over and shoes. Don’t work too hard.

Did he seriously save himself under that name in the ten seconds he had my phone? I roll my eyes. Another text appears.

Gus: Did they kill you? Are you still alive?

Barely, I think.

Me: We need to talk. STAT! I just became Chase Marino’s girlfriend.

The phone rings a second after I hit send.

“I’m sorry, what?” Gus yells.

I look around the room. How the hell am I going to be a fake girlfriend to a man who could have any woman he pleased? He has everything. There was a time when I wouldn’t have been daunted by wealth, but that was a lifetime ago. Now, I wonder if I can even pull off being someone that would run in Chase’s social circle.

“Do you think Chase is gay?” I ask, wracking my brain for some rational reasoning of what just happened.

“Uh, no? And what is going on?” he questions.

“Well, I...I need wine to explain this.”

“Are you done cleaning? Come over,” he demands.

“I just need to clean one room and then I’ll head over. Get the wine poured.”

“On it. I can’t wait to hear this story,” he says. I can only imagine him being all giddy right now. Gus fucking lives for gossip.



“It’s a good one,” I reply as I hang up.

How the hell am I going to pretend to be dating a man that I don’t even know? It’s official...I’ve lost my mind.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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### Chase

The address she sent can't be right. I pull up to a shack. It's a literal shack. Twenty-two and a half Crescent Moon Drive. The numbers are in black over a garage that is not nearly as well kept as the main house.

I stare at the large, historic house which has a sign on the front that says, Storyview Falls Magic Maids. There's a driveway with a garage to the side, and over the garage with the black numbers above it, there's a window with a light on. I can see her in there. She's turning off the light. The room looks barren. She can't possibly live like this. An apartment in an old garage?

A moment later, she pops out of a side door, down some steps and the driveway. She's wearing tight-fitting jeans, a pink sweater, and boots that come up to her knees. Her hair is down and wavy. I open my door and walk around, grasping the handle of the passenger door and opening it for her.

Her eyes widen a little and she falters, nearly tripping, but somehow manages to stay upright.

"Uh, thanks?" she manages as she steps around me and takes a seat in the car. Does she date barbarians? What types of creeps take her out that this one gesture has her shook?

I close the door once I see her reaching for the seat belt. Walking around the front, I glance inside. She's watching me,

her cheeks pink.

Sliding inside, I look over at her. “Max’s restaurant OK?” I ask.

“Sure,” she mumbles, looking everywhere but at me.

I don’t move, instead, I reach over and grasp her hand. Her eyes fly to my face.

“Ella, if we’re going to do this, you have to be able to look at me,” I state, searching her eyes for understanding.

She swallows and I glance at her throat and then back to her eyes.

“Y-you’re right. S-sorry. I...let’s just get dinner,” she stammers.

I nod and pull my hand away, placing it back on the steering wheel. “What’s your favorite food?” I ask as I turn the car on and pull out onto the empty street.

“My favorite food?”

I glance over at her. “Yeah.”

I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She purses her lips as if considering my question.

“Chocolate,” she finally states.

“What type?”

“Any type. What about you? I suppose I should know this about you,” she says as she turns toward me.

“I love a good filet,” I state.

“So you like meat?” she says and I see a smirk form on her lips. Well, well, well, my fake girlfriend has a dirty mind. I did not expect that.

“I like filet mignon,” I restate as I give her a knowing look. Her smirk grows and she looks back at the road.

“Have you always lived in Storyview Falls?” I ask.

She nods. “Born and raised. You?”

I shake my head. “Not always,” I say, deciding I don’t want to rehash my life details.

“Do you like it here?” she asks.

“I do. It’s...pleasant,” I answer.

She laughs. “Pleasant? It’s not a cup of coffee or a nice breeze.”

I chuckle. “Fine, I like it. But I also like the city and I like to travel.”

“Where have you traveled to?” she asks as I pull into a parking spot in front of the restaurant that’s on Main Street.

“Oh, here and there. I spent some time in Europe, South America, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, and Asia,” I state.

“Wow. That’s an impressive list,” she says with a sad smile.

“Have you traveled?” I ask as I open my door and quickly walk around to get hers, but she beats me to it.

“Nope,” she says, shutting her door.

I look down at her. Fuck. Why does she look so familiar? It’s weirding me out. I’m about to ask her if she’s sure we haven’t met before when I see her shiver.

“Let’s get you inside. It’s cold out here,” I say as I place my hand on the small of her back and usher her inside.

“Chase, good to see you,” Max says as we enter. Max knows everyone. Probably because he has the best pub in town, and everyone eats here. Max turns toward Ella, and his eyes widen a little when he sees my hand on her back. “Oh, hi, Ella.” He clears his throat to cover his surprise.

“Hi, Max,” Ella replies, pressing her lips together in what looks like an attempt to stifle a laugh. Well, Ella and I do know some of the same people. I suppose we do really need a good story. We’re going to have to come up with something tonight.

“Well, you’re in luck. I have your favorite booth available,” Max offers with one outstretched hand toward a

booth as he grabs menus from the hostess who has yet to have a chance to jump into this conversation and welcome us.

He leads us to the booth in the far corner with a view of Main Street.

“Would you like to hear the specials?” he asks once we are seated.

I nod and Max rattles off several delicious-sounding meals and then leaves us to peruse the menu.

“Thanks, Max,” Ella calls to him as he leaves. Her smile is warm and friendly. How can she be so happy? She cleans houses and lives above a garage.

“What? No filet?” she asks with a grin as she peers at me from over her menu.

Jesus, her grin is infectious. “There is a filet,” I state as I turn her menu and point.

“Oh, well, someone will be happy, then,” she says.

“I’m actually thinking about that Chilean sea bass special,” I tease.

She leans forward, putting her menu flat on the table. “You do know that it’s called a Patagonian toothfish, right?”

I laugh. “I did know that.”

“Seriously, have you seen them? They are so creepy looking,” she whispers as if the ugly fish will appear at the table just from her dissing it.

“So I’ve heard,” I state as I set my menu down. I nod toward her menu. “What are you having?”

“Mushroom ravioli,” she announces and sets the menu on top of mine.

“Italian, huh?”

She shrugs. “Max’s sous chef worked in Italy, and he makes amazing pasta.”

This is news to me and has me considering my choice for a brief moment. I frown. No one makes me second-guess

myself, no one.

The waitress comes over and we order. When she brings back a bottle of wine, I pour it and launch into twenty questions. I learn her favorite color is pink. She loves reading romance novels and watching rom-coms or holiday romance films. Her favorite animal is a horse. I secretly decide we should go riding at my grandfather's stables. And by the time dinner arrives, I feel more at ease. This woman is smart, very smart. We've talked about current events, the history of Storyview Falls, and why the limited holiday Reese's Cups are better than the regular ones. We might just be able to pull this off.

By the time we're eating chocolate lava cake, we're ready to concoct our meet-cute.

"So, how did we meet?" she asks as she swirls her wineglass.

"It has to be believable," I state as I ponder ideas.

"How about...I bumped into you at the coffee shop and spilled my coffee and you replaced it for me?" she suggests.

"OK, yeah, that could work. I do stop by there once in a while. And then, we started talking because you spilled some on your shoes and I said they wouldn't stain if they were Marinos."

She laughs. "Always a salesman, huh?"

"Of course. I would never miss an opportunity to put some well-crafted Marinos on the feet of a beautiful woman. It's good advertising," I reply. She blushes, and I wonder why. Do men not normally compliment her? They have to. She's gorgeous. I take the last sip of my wine and set my glass down.

"And *when* did we meet?" she inquires.

"Last week. I eventually got your number, and we went out tonight on our first date. I mentioned that my family has a dinner with friends tomorrow and asked you to join us," I continue.

“Sounds like a plan.” She frowns. “Is it weird that we just met and you’re already bringing me to meet your parents?”

I consider her question. “No. You won’t be the first woman that I’ve brought to a family meal.”

She pauses and cocks her head to the side. “Why *don’t* you have a girlfriend?”

“I don’t have time for that right now. I have... arrangements with some women who I see on occasion, but no relationships,” I state.

“What about school?” she asks. “What did you study?”

“Engineering and business,” I say. “You?”

She blushes. “I’m just finishing my degree in graphic design and a minor in marketing.”

“So your days as a house cleaner are numbered?”

“I hope so,” she sighs. And for a moment she looks tired. And I wonder how many hours she worked today. Cleaning must be tiring.

“I should get you home,” I say as I mouth “check” to the waitress who nods and scurries away to presumably get me the check.

I insist on paying and she doesn’t argue. She’s quiet as we drive back to her place. I wonder what she’s thinking. Does she regret agreeing to be my fake girlfriend? I pull up and point to the garage.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Six years,” she says quietly. “Greta lets me stay there for a very good price.”

“Oh...” I trail off as I realize that this is all she can afford. For the briefest of seconds, I feel protective over her. I don’t want her walking into the garage alone. So I park the car in the driveway and turn off the engine.

“What are you doing?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Walking you to your door, Miss Foster.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she says as she gets out of the car. I quickly follow her.

“Yes, I do.”

When we reach her door, she turns. “Are you always this...overbearing?”

I laugh. “Walking you to your door is *overbearing*?”

She nods and holds up her hand with her finger and thumb an inch apart. “A little.”

“Miss Foster, you are nothing like what I thought you’d be like,” I admit.

She furrows her brows. “What did you think I’d be like?”

I pause. I’m not about to tell her my real thoughts. Because I never share those with anyone. And honestly, I don’t know what I thought she’d be like and I’m definitely not telling her I jacked off to images of her ass swaying while cleaning.

“Just different,” I answer.

She quirks her head to the side. “Same, Mr. Marino. Same.”



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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Ella

I've seen Mr. and Mrs. Marino from a distance, but up close, they are way more intimidating. We are eating in a room off the formal dining room. A less formal, formal dining room. I want to roll my eyes when Chase tells me this right before opening one of the double doors that lead inside.

His father is seated at the head of the table like a king. His mother is seated to his left along the long side of the table. Neither one looks happy to be there. His mother is dressed impeccably as if she's ready to attend Fashion Week in Paris. I think she's in her late fifties but she looks twenty years younger than that. His father is in a suit and tie. Both are busy reading things on their phones rather than conversing.

Chase clears his throat as we stand at the side of the table. His mother looks up first. I can feel her eyes assessing the pink dress that Chase had sent over to me. I feel like I'm playing Country Club Barbie with my white cardigan and kitten-heel shoes that perfectly match my dress.

I swallow nervously as I wait for her to finish visually evaluating me. It's like some strange test and I can't be certain if I'm going to pass or fail.

"You look familiar," she says. And for the first time since I broke the vase and agreed to be Chase's fake girlfriend, I realize that in three days, I have to be back here cleaning her home. Shit. Should I have worn a disguise? What would I even

wear? A wig? Maybe I should have pretended to be a brunette or a redhead. Dread washes over me like a tsunami. She's still staring at me, and I quickly clear my throat.

"Oh, uh, well, maybe you've seen me around Storyview Falls? I live here," I manage.

She shrugs. "Perhaps."

His father finally looks up from his phone. He peers at me over glasses. "Are you going to introduce us to your friend?" he asks as he looks me up and down.

"This is Ella Foster," he introduces.

I wait for some sort of handshake to occur. But instead, something flashes in Mr. Marino's eyes, and I swear Mrs. Marino gives me a double take.

"It's nice to meet you," I state with a nod and smile, trying to find some kind of deeply hidden self-confidence.

Mr. Marino clears his throat. "Nice to make your acquaintance, Miss Foster. Are you from Storyview Falls?"

"Yes. Born and raised," I answer as Chase pulls a chair back for me and motions for me to sit.

I oblige. His hands graze my upper arms as he steps back.

"I thought we were having guests?" Chase asks.

"Last-minute change of plans. It'll just be us," Mrs. Marino answers, her eyes still glancing in my direction.

Mr. Marino opens his mouth to ask another question as Chase takes a seat next to me, but the doors from the kitchen fly open and Wendy, one of the house staff, comes out carrying a tray of coffee. Her eyes meet mine and she trips, the tray goes sailing along with the coffee. Mugs shatter and coffee spills all over the marble floor.

Fuck. I managed to tell a few staff my white lie version of what was happening, but I didn't get a chance to tell everyone yet. And Wendy was on the list of people who didn't know.

"Oh. I'm so sorry. Let me clean this up and get you fresh coffee," she says. I push my chair back, but Chase's hand grips

my thigh, keeping me in place.

I look over at him and he gives me a subtle headshake.

“It’s fine, Wendy. But do hurry, we have a busy schedule today,” Mrs. Marino says with a sigh.

What. The. Fuck?

These people are...jerks! I suddenly want to leave. I don’t belong here. But Chase’s hand is still gripping my leg tightly.

I give him a pleading look before I glance over at Wendy. “Are you alright?” I ask her.

She looks up at me and nods, her mouth hanging open like she wants to say something but then she closes it.

“I’m fine, miss. I’ll be back in two shakes,” she says as she scurries out with the broken mugs and individual coffee French presses on the silver tray.

“So, Ella, what do you do?” Mrs. Marino asks. Chase wasn’t kidding. She pays zero attention to her staff and I’m not even permanent staff, so I’m less than worthy of her attention.

“Ella’s in graphic design and marketing,” Chase interjects before I can answer.

“Oh? What firm?” Mr. Marino asks.

Chase pauses and I decide to play along. “I’m starting my own firm,” I state, because, after all, it’s the truth.

“Well, an entrepreneur. Maybe you can talk some business sense into my son here. I assume you know the business rules of branding?” Mr. Marino questions.

“Dad...” Chase begins with a long sigh.

“What? We have a good thing here. We do fine leather shoes. No more talking about your crazy shoe idea,” Mr. Marino says. I glance at Chase. His jaw is clenched. What is his father talking about?

Wendy comes back in with coffee and a plate of Danish pastries and fruit, setting it down, this time without breaking

anything. She glances my way and I give her a look that says, *I will explain later.*

She purses her lips and heads back into the kitchen.

“Fruit?” Mrs. Marino asks.

I nod. “Thank you, Mrs. Marino,” I say politely as she passes the platter toward me.

“Oh, please, call me Kayla,” Mrs. Marino insists.

I nod, blushing slightly as I take a sip of coffee. It’s not as good as Elisha’s but it’s not bad.

“So, how did you two meet?” Kayla asks.

Chase launches into our predetermined meet-cute story. The Marinos seem to believe it. Chase has barely finished telling the story when Mr. Marino’s phone buzzes.

“Sorry, have to take this. It was nice meeting you, Ella,” he says as he gets up and walks out of the room without a second glance. So much for a family meal. I wonder if all their brunches are like this. I have no real family anymore, but at least I have good friends and they would never up and leave in the middle of a meal.

“Well, I’m off to the club. Do you play tennis, Ella?” Kayla asks as she stands.

I shrug. “I played when I was younger, but it’s been years.”

“You’ll have to join me sometime, then. It’s a great sport. Never too late to start again,” she says with a smile that is somewhere between Stepford wife and a beauty pageant contestant. I can’t quite get a read on her. Mr. Marino seems... well, like the jerk I thought he was, but Kayla is either a pompous princess or maybe a misunderstood high-society wife.

The door shuts behind her and Chase turns toward me. “I’m sorry about that,” he mutters.

I look back toward the door. “About your parents?” I clarify.

He nods and his shoulders sag a little. I feel a little sorry for the guy. I may not have had many years with my dad, but he was a great dad. Chase's parents seem...not very interested in parenting. Were they always like this? I want to ask but decide that would be rude.

"Do you need to be somewhere? I can have a driver drop you off," Chase says. He had picked me up earlier, so now, I guess I'm stranded out here unless I feel like walking the five miles back to town in these ridiculous shoes.

"Oh...I..." I trail off. Normally, I go to the farmer's market at Windsor Farms on Sundays. They always have imperfect vegetables for cheap. And their eggs are less money than at the grocery store.

Chase cocks his head to the side. "What?"

"Yeah, sure. I should probably change anyhow," I murmur to myself as I look down at my clothing.

"You don't like the clothes I sent over?" he asks.

"No, that's not it. They are very nice. It's just...I go to the farmer's market usually and this is a little much for that activity," I explain. I glance toward the kitchen. "Can you give me a moment? I should explain to Wendy." I nod toward the door.

He frowns.

"Don't worry. I'll stick to our plan," I promise.

"Where is the farmer's market?" he asks.

"Windsor Farms," I say as I push back my chair and place my cloth napkin on the table.

"I'll go with you."

I stare at him. "Why? You can just drop me at home. I can take myself," I say in shock.

"Because we're pretending to date, Ella. And going to a farmer's market is something a couple would do, right?" he points out.

“I...well, yeah, I guess so,” I reply as I walk toward the door. I turn before opening it. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll wait for you in the hall,” he answers.

I step into the kitchen and Wendy glares at me. “What the hell is that about?” she asks, pointing to the dining room.

“Sorry. I meant to tell you. It just happened sort of quickly. I’m maybe seeing Chase...I mean, I am seeing Chase,” I stammer.

Wendy looks like she’s going to have a heart attack. “What?” she asks, her already big eyes growing bigger by the second.

I shrug. “He sort of ran into me at Elisha’s and one thing led to another and...anyhow, sorry I didn’t have time to tell everyone.”

She places her hands on her hips. “Are you planning on any other big surprises?” She pauses and her eyes widen again. She takes three big steps toward me, glancing around us. She pulls me by the arm toward the corner of the kitchen. “Girl, you aren’t pregnant, are you?”

“No!” I practically yell.

Putting up her hands in a defensive motion, she takes a step back. “Geez, OK. Don’t freak out.”

I roll my eyes. “What? You think Chase would only date me if he knocked me up?”

She sighs. “No...I mean...I don’t know. He just doesn’t seem your type, that’s all. Be careful with him. He isn’t exactly known around here as boyfriend material.”

“What’s he known as?” I ask, but I already know the answer.

“One-night-stand material,” she says dryly.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that, but don’t worry. We’re just having fun,” I say lightly.

“If you say so,” Wendy replies as she walks back over to the counter.

“I’ll see you later,” I add, taking a few steps to the door. I turn as I open it. “Wendy?”

She looks up from where she’s pouring some coffee.

“I appreciate you looking out for me, but I got this.”

“I hope so,” she mutters before returning her gaze to the French press in front of her.

“I hope so too,” I whisper to myself as I step into the hallway.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Chase

“Well, that went well,” I state as I drive us down the road to Windsor Farms. I know the owner, Eric, but I haven’t spoken to him in a while.

“Right,” Ella says in a low, barely audible voice. She’s been very quiet since we left the house. I realize she’s probably used to normal people and normal conversations, unlike my parents who are anything but normal. I know they mean well, but sometimes, they are so irritating. Like when they require that I get a girlfriend for image reasons. I probably should be more pissed off than I am. But I’m too focused on the potential to present the board with my idea in a few weeks. If I only have to appease my parents’ ridiculous requirements for a set number of days, then so be it. I just wish they’d see it my way. I hope I can get them to change their minds.

I pull into a parking spot, cursing the gravel. I wish Eric would pave this area. Ella insisted she change before coming out here. So, we stopped by her place. She’s wearing jeans and a sweater and looking much more like herself than she did earlier. I like her like this. She’s authentic in a way that the women I hang around normally are not.

“Where to?” I ask as we walk up to the red barn. Peeking inside, I see it’s filled with produce. About twenty patrons are milling around. I don’t see Eric, which is good. I didn’t give



much thought to explaining this girlfriend situation, at least not beyond my parents. Having to retell our story over and over seems...well, tedious.

“Over here,” she says, motioning me to a corner where there are vegetables strewn in a bin. And they are in fact ugly.

“You don’t want those squash?” I ask, pointing to a display of neatly round pumpkins and perfectly symmetrical zucchini.

“Nope, these will do,” she says as she picks up a few and places them in a bag she brought.

“Do these taste better?” I ask, frowning in total confusion.

“Uhhh...I don’t think so,” she replies as she heads toward the checkout line.

“Then, you should get one of these,” I state as we step in front of the bin of zucchini.

“Oh. Uh, no, thanks. I’m good,” she insists as she clutches her bag of ugly vegetables. I start to consider buying her one but then, for the first time in a long time, I second-guess myself. Should I not buy one for her? Is that...overstepping? What the fuck? Why am I even thinking like this?

My thoughts are broken when the cashier, a young man who looks to be in his late teens, greets Ella.

“Hey, Ella. Did you make that squash soup recipe I told you about?” he asks as he takes her five-dollar bill and hands her change. Shit, maybe I should start having the staff buy ugly vegetables, they are so cheap.

“I did. It was really good. You guys should post some of them out there. I bet more people would buy squash,” she suggests, sticking her change back in her pocket.

“That’s not a bad idea. I’ll have to suggest that to Eric,” the kid says. “You two have a good day.”

“You too, Kingsley,” she replies as she walks out toward the car, but then changes directions. I’m about to ask where the hell she’s going when I see her pull a carrot out of her bag and approach a white mare that’s standing by the fence.

“Well, hello there, Snuggles,” she says as she holds out the carrot. The horse lives up to its name and snuggles against her before chomping away on the carrot. She pets its nose gently and smiles up at it.

The horse finishes and starts trying to stick its head in the bag.

Ella laughs, a full belly laugh of complete spontaneous happiness, and something inside me is drawn right to her side. The sound is so familiar, like coming home.

“Who’s your friend?” I ask as I pat the horse on the neck. She turns to me and rubs her head against my arm. I chuckle at the affectionate beast.

“This is Snuggles,” she says with a grin still stretched across her face.

“Hi there, Snuggles. I see you like ugly vegetables,” I state.

The horse whinnies and Ella giggles. “She does. She’s a good girl, isn’t she?” Snuggles responds with another whinny.

“You really do like horses?” I ask as I watch Ella stroke Snuggles on her neck. The way her hand moves mirrors the motions one would make if they were brushing the horse as if she’s done that before. Maybe Ella has worked at a farm?

“I do. I wasn’t kidding when I said they were my favorite animal,” she replies as she stares fondly at the horse.

“I do too,” I admit, shoving my hands into my pockets as I continue to watch her.

She pauses and glances over at me. “You do? I thought you liked lions? Oh, wait, doesn’t your grandfather own some horses?” She frowns as if remembering something.

“He does. I once had a horse, but it was years ago,” I reply, remembering my childhood horse, Gilbert, and how we’d go off riding in the way back of the estate where we couldn’t be found. I’d disappear for hours and hours. It was my escape.

“I used to have a horse,” she says quietly. Her eyes glaze over slightly and she looks away.

Something inside me snaps. I raise a hand to her cheek and wipe a stray tear. “You must have loved her very much.”

“Him...and I did. Gunther was the best,” she says.

In the back of my mind, I begin to remember something, but it leaves as quickly as it came. “When did you have a horse?” I ask as I pull my hand back.

She looks back at me. “Once upon a time.” She clears her throat and wipes her eyes. “That was before...anyhow, it doesn’t matter. It was a long time ago.” She pats Snuggles on the side. “Later, alligator,” she says as she kisses the horse’s soft nose and turns to walk toward the car. She manages three steps before she slides in some mud and goes flying. I manage to grab her coat and pull her back against me, my arms wrapping tightly around her. I can smell her shampoo and feel her shapely body beneath her clothes, and for a split second, I don’t want to let go. Shit, I can’t get attached. I have to let her go after our arrangement ends. Why do I feel like that is going to be harder than I think it will be?

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Ella

“Damn!” I whisper as I lean against his chest trying to get my footing. He steadies me and then very slowly lets go.

“You alright?” he asks, his voice hoarse against my ear, his breath blowing against my cheek. Why does he have to smell so good? Wait, do I like having his arms wrapped tightly around me?

“Yeah,” I manage as I take a step forward. I glance down and see the mud on my shoes. That sucks. “Why isn’t it easier to clean shoes? There has to be material that’s easier to clean than this!” I say loudly, mostly to myself.

I start to walk toward the car and realize that Chase isn’t behind me. I turn and he’s staring at my feet.

“What?” I ask, giving him an annoyed look.

“You make a good point,” he states, his gaze not leaving my shoes.

“Well, you’re a shoe guy, right? Maybe you can figure that one out someday,” I add as I continue walking. He finally starts to move, and a beep tells me he just unlocked the car. His hand comes out and opens my door before I can do it myself. He waits until I’m safely inside before shutting it and walking around to his side. He’s typing on his phone as he opens his door and takes a seat.

He steers us out of the parking lot but not back toward town. I turn to him. “Where are we going?”

He smiles at me. “Somewhere,” he says with a smirk.

I roll my eyes. “Where’s somewhere?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he replies as he taps a screen in his car. “Pick out a song.”

I scroll through his music as he drives. I hate admitting that I like his selection. It’s eclectic and that surprises me. I finally choose a song that I think he won’t be into. I hit play and REO Speedwagon’s *Keep on Loving You* comes spilling out of the speakers.

There’s no way he actually knows this song. It’s super old and I only know it because my dad used to listen to it sometimes.

I’m surprised when Chase’s voice begins singing along to the lyrics. I glance over at him and his eyes dart to mine. I grin and join him in the chorus. By the time he pulls off onto a private drive, we’re belting out the song at full volume.

I’m not sure where we are, but I know it’s near where my family’s property was. I don’t recognize the buildings that appear at the end of the drive. There are stables that look well cared for with their freshly lacquered wood beams and doors. Horses frolic in nearby fields. A horse weathervane sits prominently on top of the largest building which I assume is the main stable.

Chase parks the car and gets out before I can ask a question. I open my door and he’s there, holding out his hand. I tentatively take it and he pulls me to my feet.

“Where are we?” I whisper, our faces close together. I can see a few freckles on his suntanned skin. How is he so tan in the middle of December?

“My grandfather’s stables,” he says warmly. “Come on.” He places a hand on the small of my back and urges me forward. I start walking toward the large building where he’s leading us. Inside, there are two beautiful black horses all saddled up and ready to be ridden.

“Hi there,” I say as I step forward, letting the horse on the right sniff my outstretched hand.

“That’s Velvet and this is Rook,” he introduces. He pulls some sugar cubes out of a pouch on the wall and hands me one. We give them to the horses. “Shall we?”

I look up at him and he nods to the horses. Velvet reaches using her long neck to try and get more sugar cubes from the pouch on the wall.

“Velvet!” Chase growls as he takes her reins.

She gives him a frustrated whinny and he laughs. “You are so ornery,” he chides.

I laugh and it comes out as a snort. I throw my hand over my mouth as Chase looks at me. He’s not laughing, it’s like he’s seen a ghost.

“What?” I ask through my fingers.

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“Ornery? Are you an eighty-two-year-old man?” I ask with a smirk.

He glares at me. “No, but I know...one.” He slows his words as footsteps approach us.

“You kids going for a ride?” the voice of an old man asks from behind us, his accent thick.

I turn to find an elderly man. There is zero doubt in my mind that he is Chase’s grandfather, the famous Lorenzo Marino. He’s the spitting image of Chase, or at least what I imagine an eighty-something-year-old Chase would look like. Do I bow? What do I do? I suddenly feel like I have two hands too many.

“Nonno, what are you doing out here?” Chase asks. For the first time since we’ve met, there’s affection in his voice. His normal pompous and grumpy demeanor is gone. This is the opposite of my awkward meeting with his parents. Lorenzo seems laid back and friendly.

“I’m checking on Beatrix Clopper,” Lorenzo replies with a smile. “She wasn’t feeling well last night, so the vet gave her some meds.”

“Oh?” Chase replies as he cranes his neck to look down a few stalls where a horse with a white star on its nose leans out to look at us. “Bea, you aren’t getting sick on us, are you?” he asks, stepping up to the horse who nuzzles him.

Lorenzo pats the horse’s side. “You’re looking better, my old friend,” he says to the horse and then looks over at me. He flashes me a warm smile and I can immediately tell that sixty years ago, this was a man who must have had women falling at his feet.

“Who’s this?” Lorenzo asks, stepping away from the horse and toward me.

“This is Ella Foster...my girlfriend,” Chase stammers as he motions toward me.

I hold out my hand, but Lorenzo bats it away and leans in to kiss one cheek and then the other in a very European greeting.

“Nice to make your acquaintance, Miss Foster,” he says, his accent coming out a bit thicker.

“Likewise,” I say with a grin.

“We’re going for a ride, Nonno. We’ll be back,” Chase says quickly and then offers me a foot to help me mount Velvet. I accept it and climb up on the horse. Chase follows suit with Rook.

“Have fun. It’s warmed up out there. A nice day for a ride,” Lorenzo offers as he stares at me. Something feels familiar about him, but I can’t quite place it. I give him a big smile as Velvet and I trot after Rook and Chase.

Chase leads us past the fenced fields and into the woods. There’s a trail back here and it follows alongside a stream. We’re quiet for a long time, neither one of us speaking until we reach a clearing and I can see the stables back below us.

“Do you come out here often?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not anymore.” He nods toward me. “You ride well.”

Shrugging, I pat Velvet's neck. "I used to ride all the time. I..." I hesitate. Do I tell him about my past? Does that make me look weak? But Chase leans forward, waiting for me to continue and something about his movement eggs me on. "My father and mother owned property out here." I motion toward the back side of the hill that we're on. "It's probably close by. I don't remember much. I never come out here anymore. Anyhow, my mom died from cancer when I was little. And my dad remarried when I was seven to Nancy...you know her, yes?"

"She plays tennis with my mother," he reiterates what I already know.

"Well, she moved in with her two daughters, Myra and Mila. They were five. At first, I was so excited to have a mom and sisters. But then, when I was eleven, I was out riding Gunther, my horse, and Dad was calling for me to come in for the night. I waved at him, and he waved back and then I thought he tripped and fell, but...he had a massive heart attack." I pause remembering that day. The sirens...my dad. I wipe a stray tear. I never cry anymore, but I keep weeping like a fool in front of Chase. "Anyhow, Nancy sold the farm. She hated it out here and she bought this big beach house on the far side of town. She sent the girls to boarding schools and then college. She told me she didn't want to move me from my school since I already knew everyone. And then when I turned eighteen, she said I needed to move out. She had somehow gotten Dad to rewrite his will so that she got everything. I got a few things belonging to my mom and so I moved out and Greta hired me and gave me a place to stay."

"What happened to Gunther?" he asks.

"Nancy had him sold. I honestly don't know. I tried to find him at first but then gave up looking after a few years. He'd be almost twenty now. He probably doesn't even remember me," I say sadly as I play with Velvet's soft mane.

"Why do you even still talk to Nancy?" he questions as his hand brushes against my leg.



“Because.” I look up into his eyes. He looks...concerned. Strange for a playboy. “I guess because she’s the only family I have left.”

“But it sounds like she treats you like shit,” Chase says in disgust.

I shrug. “Sometimes she’s OK. Like she found some old shoes in a closet a while back that belonged to my mom and dropped them off instead of throwing them away,” I explain but I know I sound pathetic. I know I’m grasping for straws out of desperation to be loved by a woman who will never love me, I just don’t want to face the facts yet because giving up hope, means there’s no chance of a happily ever after.

“Well, I’m sorry that’s your family. What about your stepsisters?”

“They’re OK. Myra is sort of self-obsessed and Mila is just really forgetful. So I only hear from Myra when she needs something and I only hear from Mila when she remembers to text me.”

“Sooo...not close, then,” he says.

I sigh as I stare back out at the vista. “No, I guess not.” I suddenly feel silly and pathetic. “But I do have good friends,” I say quickly, trying to make him not feel too sorry for me.

“That’s good. Friends are good,” he replies. He’s quiet for a long beat and I wonder what he’s thinking.

“Come on, let’s go to the back trail. I haven’t been there in ages,” he finally says as he turns and takes off, leaving me and Velvet trying to catch up. As we go down the side of the hill away from his grandfather’s stables, a memory starts to permeate my mind. I’ve been here before. I’ve been here with...Gunther.

“Wait up, Ace!” I call out but I don’t think he hears me as Velvet and I gallop amongst trees. I’m about to yell again, when “bam!”

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Chase

“Ella!” I call out as Rook and I rush toward her. I jump off the horse and crouch down by Ella who’s lying on the ground. For a moment, I think I’ll have to call an ambulance but then her big blue eyes open and she stares up at me.

“Ace,” she whispers.

My heart which had been thundering in my chest starts beating rapidly. I think I’m having a heart attack.

“It’s you,” she says a little louder as she tries to sit up.

“Whoa, don’t get up too fast,” I tell her as I help her to sit up.

“It’s really you,” she says as tears start welling in her eyes. Fuck. How did this happen? “I never thought I’d see you again.”

“But...” I trail off as I search for words. How is this possible? How did I not know it was her? I know this woman but as a girl.

“You went away,” she remembers.

I sit down next to her, and we both lean against Velvet who’s decided Ella needs a backrest.

“Boarding school,” I explain. God, I had thought it might be her. When she said Gunther, I started to remember. I wanted to bring her here where we first met and then I heard her call me “Ace” and I knew that she knew. She was the little girl

who saved me. Well, technically, I saved her, but I don't know what I'd have done without her company that summer.

"I was so sad...and lonely after that. And then Dad died," she says as she looks up at me.

I open my mouth to speak but then there's a horse head poking at my back pocket. "Velvet!" I scold.

Velvet doesn't relent and Ella giggles. "Just give her one," she urges as she reaches into her pocket and produces a sugar cube for the horse.

"You're spoiling her," I grumble.

"Hardly," she answers as she pats Velvet's side.

"Are you sure you're OK?" I ask again as I feel the side of her head.

She bats my hand away. "I'm fine. I mean, my pride is a little injured, but I'll make it." She looks around and laughs, one of her snorting laughs that makes me laugh. "This is where I fell that first time."

I look at where we're sitting. She's right.

"Over there," I point to a willow tree on the edge of the pond.

She nods. "Gunther got his hoof stuck and I went flying."

"I heard you yelling," I add.

"I'd never seen a naked boy before," she whispers in mock horror.

I roll my eyes. "I had on underwear," I point out.

"Whatever, it was practically falling off you. Your whole ass was on display," she replies, poking me in the ribs.

"I can't believe you got stuck in a tree," I retort.

She blushes. "I probably shouldn't have been wearing overalls to ride, but Gunther wanted to go out, so I just threw on my riding boots and helmet," she tries to explain with a semi-guilty grin. But I'm starting to shake with laughter at the

memory of little Ella hanging from a tree branch by her overalls.

“You would have been so screwed if I hadn’t been there,” I manage before bursting into laughter as I remember finding her.

“Probably. I’d have never heard the end of it from Nancy, that’s for sure,” she answers with a widening grin. “Why’d you say your name was Ace?”

“My grandfather calls me that sometimes and some of the guys at school would call me that, but it’s been years since anyone but Nonno has said it.” I pause. “You said your name was Eleanor.”

She rolls her eyes. “It is. Ella’s my nickname, you jackass.”

“Oh, right.” I suddenly feel like an idiot. How had I not known it was her? I didn’t really know the family that lived on the property that backed up to the woods. I guess I was vaguely aware of some kids over there, but they were younger and I just didn’t pay attention. I know I’ve seen her stepmother around town, but I just never paid attention. All the connections were right in front of me this whole time and I was completely oblivious.

“We’re really stupid for not having figured this out before now, aren’t we?” she says my thoughts out loud, which is something she used to have an uncanny ability at doing.

“That’s for sure.” I look at Ella for the first time, really look at her. She has the same eyes, but otherwise, she looks so different than the little girl I spent a summer hanging out with. I didn’t tell a soul, not even Tate because I didn’t want him to tease me for hanging out with a kid. But Eleanor was more than a kid. She was my friend. And we had so much fun that summer. I could just be me when I was with her. I didn’t have to be a cool kid starting high school soon. I was just her “Ace.” My days as a kid were waning, even then I knew it, but Ella drew them out that summer. She let me be free and wild. We built forts, went swimming, galloped across the back fields, and even came up with a secret handshake.

“Your dad...that’s why you weren’t here when I came home the next summer,” I say sadly, remembering how I’d come to our spot for three weeks in a row before I finally gave up.

She nods and looks out at the pond.

“Yeah, that was the end of it...all of it,” she whispers as she watches two ducks in the pond. She wipes a stray tear away and glances back at me. “Do you think the treehouse we built is still over there?” She points in the direction of an old oak tree we’d found while riding one day.

“Only one way to find out,” I state as I stand and offer her my hand. She takes it and immediately launches into our secret handshake. I laugh as I reciprocate it.

“I can’t believe you remember that,” she says, giggling as she climbs up on Velvet and starts trotting toward our old treehouse. It takes us about five minutes to get there, but when we do, we find that it is in fact still there.

She looks up at it. “It’s not as...” She trails off.

“Sturdy as you remember?” I finish her sentence.

She shrugs. “Yeah. I don’t know what I was expecting. I mean we were kids. It’s pretty impressive considering we didn’t even know how to use the hammer. I think you did most of the work.”

“I mean, it looks alright,” I declare as I hop off Rook and walk over to it, giving one of the ladder rungs a gentle shake. Her confidence in my building skills that day were next level. She always had the uncanny ability to make me feel like I could do anything, be anything. I start to climb it.

“Chase! Stop! That’s a really bad idea!” Ella calls out from where she’s jumping off Velvet.

“It’s fine,” I assure her. I manage to get up to the platform we built, and I look around. “See, still sturdy!” I declare as I give a little jump. Now, in retrospect, the jump was a bad idea, but I did it anyhow. And now, I’m falling, through the wood platform and straight onto the ground fifteen feet below me. I land with a thud.

She rushes to my side. “Oh my God! Are you OK?” Her hands are running all over me, clearly looking for an injury, and fuck if my dick doesn’t start to respond.

I brush her hand away gently. “I’m fine. My pride is...a little injured, but I’ll make it,” I say as I start to get up and brush the leaves off my ass.

“I can’t believe you did that!” she says with a roll of her eyes.

“It really did look sturdy,” I try to explain but even I know my actions were more of the fourteen-year-old boy she met all those years ago and less of the nearly thirty-year-old man I am now.

She glares at me. “Chase, you should be more careful.”

I grin like a child caught being naughty but not caring. She gives me a playful shove on my arm, and I wince.

“Oh my God! Are you OK? I’m so sorry!” she says as she examines my arm.

There’s a small gash in my shirt, but otherwise, it’s fine.

“I’ll survive. Come on, we should head back before it gets dark out,” I state as I step over toward Rook.

“Hold on,” she says as she reaches for her bag that she strapped to Velvet’s saddle. I watch as she rifles around it and then pulls out an alcohol swab and bandage.

“What else do you have in there?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

She shrugs and laughs. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” She rolls up my sleeve and makes quick work of fixing me up. I watch as she leans over me, her perfume making me inhale deeply. Her hands are warm against my skin. I never thought about her like that back then. She was just a kid, like a sister to me. But now...no, I can’t think like that. This is a short-term arrangement.

“Seriously, should I be concerned? Do you have weapons in that thing?” I ask.

She gives me a pointed look as she steps back and puts the trash back in her bag. “Listen, what’s in a woman’s purse is between her and the purse gods. Don’t worry about it.”

I chuckle. “Noted. I had no idea there were ancient Greek gods of purses.”

She winks at me as she gets back into her saddle. “The more you know.”

I shake my head as our horses lead us back toward the stable. I catch her glancing back over her shoulder at her parents’ old property. There’s a house in the distance and a stable along with a few small outbuildings. I don’t know who owns it now, but it’s clear she deeply misses her old life. I hate what Nancy did to her. I always viewed Nancy as just another fake friend of my mom’s. Someone at the tennis and golf clubs who only cared about the latest fashion trends, but now, I know she’s so much worse than that.

By the time we make it back to the horses’ stalls, I know three things for sure.

One, I want to protect Ella. I just don’t know how I’m going to do that without hurting her.

Two, I want to destroy Nancy Foster.

And three, I need to figure out how to not fall in love with Ella.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Ella

I lean over the bathtub as I scrub it. My knees are sore, and my skin is itchy from wearing the cleaning gloves. I need to finish this job so I can get home and change. The tennis club has a charity event tonight and Mrs. Marino requested that Chase and I attend. I didn't know parents could just request their adult children be present like this. Sighing, I rinse the tub. My phone pings, and I peel off my sweaty gloves and reach for it.

Gus: Shut the front door.

Me: What?

Gus: You're going to the tennis club?

Me: Uh, yes?

Gus: What are we wearing?

Me: You have to be kidding me. Wait. Are you going?

Gus: Girl, I'm like the captain of the men's tennis team.

Me: You play doubles with Mrs. Hatchet. That's hardly a captain.

Gus: Whatever. What are you wearing?

Me: Uhhhh...don't know.

Gus: For the love of...meet me at the thrift store. We need to get you an outfit.

Me: Gus. No.



Gus: You're meeting David. You have to look good. Consider me your stylist for the night.

Me: Wait? I'm meeting Mr. Internet Boyfriend!

Gus: Yes. Behave.

Me: You behave.

Gus: (smiling devil emoji)

Me: Gus. Seriously, you have to behave. All of the Marinos will be there and Mila told me she, Myra, and Nancy are coming.

Gus: Wait the she-devil twins are home?

Me: Yes. For winter break.

My phone vibrates and I see a credit in my banking app. I click on it.

From Gustavo Perez: \$75.

Note: You better spend all of this for your outfit. I need David to be super impressed by your fashion skills.

I groan.

Me: Seriously?

Gus: YES!

Me: I hate you.

Gus: You love me.

Me: You are seriously warped.

Gus: Obviously. (rolling eye emoji)

Me: OK. Finishing up here and heading over to the thrift store.

Gus: Cool beans. See you there, fashionista.

I shake my head as I put my cleaning supplies away and go out to Princess. I rub at a small scratch on her door as if it will magically buff away. My phone pings again with a text from Chase. I seriously need to change his name on my phone.

World's Best Boyfriend: Are you still good for tonight?

Me: Yep.

World's Best Boyfriend: I'll pick you up at seven.

Me: Sounds good.

World's Best Boyfriend: And you're fine with seeing Nancy?

Me: Nope.

World's Best Boyfriend: Sorry. We don't have to stay long.

Me: It's fine.

World's Best Boyfriend: No, it's not. I'm sorry, Ella.

Me: Hey, I agreed to this.

World's Best Boyfriend: That was before...

Me: Still doesn't change the fact that we have publicly announced ourselves as dating. We have to commit.

World's Best Boyfriend: Thank you for doing this.

Me: Thanks for not getting me fired.

He doesn't reply and I drive off to the thrift store. It's been almost a week since I started pretending to date Chase. And it's been four days since we figured out that we knew each other as kids. That changed things somehow. He's been...dare I say, sweeter? It's like he's peeled back ten layers of his onion shell to reveal that he's not just some grumpy, arrogant playboy billionaire. He sent me flowers yesterday. The day before that, I had coffee delivered from Elisha's café to start my day. And the day before that, I got lunch from Max's sent to where I was working. It's going to be very hard not to fall for Chase, especially now that I know he's my Ace. How can Ace and Chase be the same person? And how could I have not known that? I always thought if I saw Ace again, I'd know it was him.

I pull into a parking spot next to the store. I already see Duchess parked there. Gus must have beat me here.

I open the door to find Heather, the owner, discussing the upcoming gala with Gus.

“I’d die for an invite. I hear it’s going to be a who’s who of Storyview Falls,” she gushes as she leans on her counter.

Gus is examining a necklace. “That it is.”

“There’s my favorite customer,” Heather exclaims when she looks over to find me at the door.

“Hi, Heather,” I reply, waltzing in and heading over to the racks with my sizes.

“Oh, I already pulled stuff for you. Heather started a dressing room,” Gus calls out as he saunters toward the back of the store.

“Great,” I mutter as I open the dressing room curtain and survey the clothes. They aren’t horrendous. Just...not totally me.

“I know, I know. Just try them on,” Gus says reassuring me.

I try on one outfit and then another and another. I swear I’m trying on outfits for thirty minutes with Heather bringing more every few seconds. I’m about to give up when Gus hands me a pink top.

“Try this with the skirt you just had on,” he requests.

I pull on the top and skirt, a cute floral pattern in black and white.

“Oh, and this jacket,” he adds as he tosses a cute black cropped jacket over the curtain.

I do as I’m told and slide my feet into cute pink pumps that somehow match the top.

I push the curtain back and Heather and Gus let out collective squeals.

“OMG, that’s it!” Gus says loudly.

“I love it. It looks great on you. Pink is totally your color,” Heather agrees.

I frown when I look at the jacket price. It puts me three dollars over the money Gus sent me. I really shouldn’t be

spending any money.

“And because you’re getting four items, you get a discount!” Heather announces.

I let out a sigh of relief and silently thank the universe. And just like that, I’m walking out in my new outfit.

“I’ll see you there. You look great!” Gus says as he kisses my cheek. I get in Princess and drive the five blocks to my place. I park just as Chase pulls up behind me.

I get out and so does he. He takes three steps and stops. I frown, looking down at my outfit. Did I get it dirty? No. I look around me. Everything seems fine.

“Hey,” I say as I start walking toward him.

“You look...amazing,” Chase says, his voice low and gravelly. I realize then why women fall at their feet for him. His dark eyes are appraising. I suddenly want him to want me. No, no, no. I can’t want that. I’m just a temporary thing. Who am I kidding? I couldn’t possibly be with Chase. He might as well live on another planet. Maybe if my dad hadn’t died. Maybe if I had inherited money and finished college on time and could already have started my business. Shit, there’s a lot of maybes.

“Thanks,” I whisper as I let him open the passenger door for me. Our hands brush and I swear I feel that current of electricity again.

He’s quiet when he gets back inside. I shiver and he presses a button to raise the heat in the car.

“You want the seat warmers?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I say because right now, I feel overheated. Between smelling Chase’s cologne and his arm muscle contracting with each shift of the gear stick, I’m beginning to think Chase Marino might have a magic button that controls my libido.

“You look flushed. Are you feeling well?” Chase asks as he looks over at me.

I realize my face must be visible with the passing streetlights. I clear my throat and nod. "I'm fine."

"We don't have to stay long. I don't want to make this uncomfortable for you," he says.

"It's fine. My friend Gus will be there," I assure him.

Five minutes later, he pulls up to the valet at the tennis club. The attendant opens my car door and Chase is around the car in an instant to escort me inside. There are already several dozen people here, including his parents. They say a half-hearted hello to us. And then I see them, my so-called family.

I tense and Chase's gaze follows mine. "You want to avoid them, or shall we say hello?"

I glance back at Mila, Myra, and my stepmom. Nancy is talking to some man that I don't recognize. Myra has some guy with her, and Mila is looking uncomfortable with her phone glued to her face.

Chase takes one look at them and then, to my horror, they all make eye contact with me at once. Unapproving gazes shoot at me like daggers. Gazes that say *you don't belong here* and *who do you think you are?*

I'm about to tell Chase that we should leave, but then suddenly, I'm spun around, and Chase takes my head in his big hands and presses his lips to mine. I don't move for a long beat. I'm too shocked. Is Chase kissing me? What the hell? I should be pissed, but...I'm not. In fact, I'm the opposite of pissed. I'm enjoying it? Yes, yes, I am.

Chase's lips are smooth and warm against mine. Our breaths mingle as I let out a sigh. I suddenly want more, so much more. But just as fast as he kissed me, he stops, and I'm left wishing he would continue.

"That'll have them talking," he says with a wink as he takes my hand and drags me out to the balcony that overlooks some gardens and the small terrace where people have drinks and snacks after playing. Little fairy lights illuminate the otherwise dark space, leaving it feeling a little magical.

Once we are alone, Chase stops and looks back down at me. “I’m sorry. I...I thought that might help things,” he stammers.

I step toward him so we are almost nose to nose since I’m wearing heels and standing on an area a step up from him.

“Ace, you can’t do that without warning...I...” I trail off as I lean up and press my lips to his. I can’t help myself. I need more Chase.

This time, Chase’s lips part immediately. His hands fly to my face, cupping it and angling it as his tongue strokes the seam of my lips, coaxing them apart. I oblige and our tongues begin to feel one another. He tastes like the champagne we were offered while talking to his parents. He’s controlling but not overbearing. I groan against his lips and his one hand reaches around me and tightly grips my ass, pressing my body against his and...holy shit! Chase’s erection digs into my belly. And I know then that the rumors are one hundred percent true. This man is well endowed. I swallow. If that rumor is true, then are the rumors about his abilities with that appendage also true?

I’m about to ask him when a clearing throat behind me has Chase stepping back all too soon.

“Hate to interrupt, but I wanted to introduce myself to you and introduce you both to my date, David,” Gus’s voice says.

I blush and then further redden when I steal a look up at Chase. His darkened eyes are still on me, and I feel as if he could literally eat me alive right now. I take a breath and turn to see Gus next to a man about three inches taller than him. He looks very handsome in a rugged outdoorsy sort of way. I’m a bit surprised by this because Gus is the opposite of outdoorsy.

“Hi, David. I’m Ella. It’s so nice to finally meet you,” I manage as I try to compose myself. Gus shoots me a pointed look and I glare back at him before plastering on a smile at David.

“Likewise, Ella,” David says.

“And this is Chase,” I add, motioning to my fake date... my fake date that I was just real kissing. I blush and Gus gives me another pointed look. I shrug slightly. I know there will most definitely be a conversation later.

“Pleasure to meet you, Chase,” Gus says as he extends his hand. Chase shakes it and looks between the two men.

“Do I know you?” he asks David.

David pauses and then laughs. “You’re Chase Marino.”

Chase nods.

“I own Tenning’s Sporting Goods,” David says.

“Oh yes, we were at the conference a few months ago,” Chase says warmly. “I’ve been meaning to reach out. I’m working on some prototypes, and you were one of the people I was thinking about contacting to get some feedback.”

“Of course, I’d love to. You still have my contact info?” David asks.

“Yes. My assistant will be in touch soon,” Chase offers.

“Great,” David replies.

“I hate to be rude, but we were just getting ready to leave,” Chase says.

“Oh? You should stick around for a few more minutes. My company is auctioning off some great things tonight,” David urges.

“We’ll be here for a few more minutes,” I promise with a smile.

“Well, great meeting you, Chase,” Gus says as he gives me another look that says, *Girl, call me.*

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. “Yep, see you guys,” I say as I take Chase by the hand and lead him inside. I’m so focused on escaping Gus and what was surely going to be a game of twenty questions with my fake boyfriend, that I don’t realize we’ve just stepped in front of my stepmom and stepsisters.

“Oh, Ella, I didn’t even see you there,” Nancy says as I almost run into her. Great. Just great. The awkwardness of having my bestie walk in on me kissing my fake boyfriend pales in comparison to having to introduce him to my stepfamily, especially since I now know Nancy is well aware of who he is.



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Chase

Nancy Foster has always rubbed me the wrong way. And that's saying something considering that I've barely had any interactions with her ever. I swear she's undressing me with her eyes and the look of shock on her face as I wrap my arm around Ella has me fighting a smirk.

"Nancy," I say with a nod.

"Who's your date, Ellie-belly?" the woman next to her asks.

"Myra, Mila, this is Chase...my boyfriend," Ella states. She steps in closer to me and some weird protective vibe comes over me. I kiss the side of her head and smile my best fake smile at all three women.

Myra nearly spits out her champagne. "Y-your boyfriend?" she stammers, her voice rising an octave with each syllable.

"Yes," Ella replies as she plasters on a smile that I can tell is forced even though she has the upper hand.

"Oh, I didn't know you were dating anyone?" Mila says. Mila's looking at me quizzically as if she's not really sure who I am, but feels like she should know who I am. Myra glances at her sister and rolls her eyes. "Nice to meet you, Chase." Mila doesn't seem as cunning as her sister and mother. Her responses seem genuine, but I could be misreading her.

“Oh, well, yes. We haven’t been dating for long,” Ella replies.

“Do your parents know what Ella does?” Nancy says with a laugh as if this is some sort of game. I decide to mess with her.

“Yes. They like people with strong work ethics,” I state as I look between her and her daughters.

Nancy’s face turns a shade of red which I have to say I find very amusing. “How are your college experiences going?” I ask Ella’s stepsisters.

They both shrug and stare at me as if I just asked if they dated aliens.

“It was very nice meeting you all, but I must get back over to my parents. They wanted me to check out the silent auction items for them. Have you bid on anything yet?” I inquire.

“Uh, no. Not yet,” Nancy says quickly, and I can tell by the look she’s giving me that she has no intention of actually spending money tonight. I wonder if she’s squandered all her wealth...all of Ella’s wealth. The thought has me seeing red, but now is not the time to make a fool of Nancy. Right now, I just want to get Ella out of here.

“You should go take a look. Enjoy your evening,” I say as I place a hand on the small of Ella’s back and direct her away from her stepfamily.

“Sorry about them. They weren’t actually too bad. Thanks for making that quick and painless,” Ella whispers as we walk across the room.

“Yeah, they are interesting. I’m glad we didn’t get stuck talking to them. I have a feeling they are only here for the status points of attending,” I state as I offer Ella a plate at the food bar.

“I thought we were leaving,” she says as she tentatively reaches for the plate.

“We are, but I want to drive home the point that you are most definitely with me,” I explain as I fill her plate with some

food and then reach for a chocolate-covered strawberry. I hold it up to her pink lips. “Bite,” I command.

She gives me a look that says, *what the fuck*, but complies. I watch those lips wrap around the fruit. I’ve never wanted to be a piece of fruit before, but right now, I’m jealous of this damn strawberry. I lean forward as I pull the fruit away and kiss her.

Then I glance back at her stepmom to find her gaping. I look back at Ella. “Mission accomplished, Eleanor. I do believe we’ve stunned your stepmom.”

She giggles. “Well, that’s a first for me.”

I place a quick kiss on her nose. “It won’t be the last if I have anything to do with it.”

She looks at me with a shocked expression.

“What?” I ask as I take a bite of another strawberry.

“Nothing...it’s just...you don’t have to...it’s not like...you know...” She trails off as she blushes.

“I know I don’t have to, Ella, but I want to. No one should treat you like that. You deserve better,” I state. I’m beginning to wonder if anyone has ever stood up for her before, at least against her wicked witch of a stepmom. As we eat in silence for a moment, I try to remember if she spoke about her stepfamily when we were kids. I don’t recall. But then again, most of our time together was exploring the far reaches of my grandfather’s property and doing fun kid things like building the treehouse. Was I a bad friend back then? I never considered why a young girl was off, riding by herself so often. I remember I did ask once about her parents, and she just said something about her father traveling for work often. Which means Nancy didn’t give a shit where she was at so long as she wasn’t in front of her. I feel my blood boil again.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say as I hear the auction beginning. Everyone’s attention is turned away from us and we slowly make our way out of the room.

When we’re clear of prying eyes, I lead her to a small side garden on the property. It’s a warm night for this time of year,

but the electric heaters in the garden make it feel even warmer. I sit on a bench and pat the space next to me. Ella sits and looks down at her hands.

I reach out and place a finger under her chin, forcing her to look up at me.

“You alright?” I ask.

Her eyes mist over but she nods.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought you here. It was too much,” I apologize as I smile at her. “But I’m glad we could shock your stepmom.”

“No, it’s fine. If we’re doing this whole fake dating thing, being public was part of the deal, right?”

“It was...I mean, it is,” I answer.

A noise startles us both and we look over to find an older woman making out with some man in the bushes.

“What in the...” I start.

“Oh, uh, shit, we should...” Ella trails off as she stands abruptly, but her sudden motion has the woman pulling back from her date.

“Oh, hello, kids,” the woman says with a smile. She looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t place her. Her bright pink lipstick is smeared across her face, and when the older gentleman turns, his lips are covered in the same bright shade of color.

“We wondered how long we’d have this make-out area to ourselves,” the man says with a laugh.

“S-sorry, Marie...we were just...” Ella trails off again, clearly at a loss for words.

“Oh, pish-posh, Ella, don’t overthink things. You need to loosen up, and from the looks of it, you found yourself a perfect gentleman to do that with. Mr. Chase,” she says to me with a nod.

“We were just, uh, leaving,” Ella manages.

“Don’t stop your bench sex on our account,” the man says as he motions to the bench we just stood up from.

“No, we weren’t, uh, no, it’s fine,” Ella sputters.

“We were just leaving,” I pipe up.

“I think they’re shy,” Marie whispers loudly to her beau.

“For the love of God, Marie, you’re killing these kids’ mojo. We’ll leave you young people to it. Lord knows you have more stamina than I do,” the man announces as he takes Marie’s hand.

Marie leans forward toward Ella.

“Try a little liquor in her coffee. Loosens her right up.”

“Marie!” Ella yells.

Marie’s laughter increases as she follows the man down the path. “You’ll thank me later, Ella. Don’t waste your youth.”

Ella slaps a hand to her head. “I’m so sorry. That’s Greta’s friend. She’s clearly intoxicated.”

Laughing, I take Ella’s hand in mine. “It’s fine. Maybe we should head somewhere else. We keep getting interrupted here.”

Ella freezes and looks at me and I suddenly realize I sound like a presumptuous jackass. “I mean. We don’t have to do... anything. I just meant we could talk more,” I stammer.

“I, uh, sure,” she replies while another blush creeps up her cheeks.

We head over to the valet, and once we’re in my car, I glance over at her. I don’t want to take her to my apartment at my parents’ place. I need Ella alone. I want Ella all to myself.

“Do you have to work in the morning?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. I don’t have work tomorrow. But I do need to study at some point,” she says slowly as she tries to decipher what I mean.

“Good, ’cause I want to take you somewhere,” I state.

“Somewhere?” she asks.

“Yep. Somewhere,” I reply as I steer us toward a place where we can hopefully be without interruption. Ella’s quiet as I drive. I glance over at her occasionally. A part of me wants so much more, but she deserves better. I can’t give her my full attention. I can’t give anyone my full attention. And as much as I shouldn’t be taking her to my secret place, I know I can’t stop myself any longer. I want her. All of her. Maybe if I can just get a little taste, just for one night, I’ll be able to get her out of my system. Yes, that’s it. Just one night to get my fill. That should work. Shouldn’t it?

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Ella

I want to ask where we are going. I open my mouth at least a dozen times to inquire, but then I don't. Somehow, even though this relationship is fake, I trust him. I trusted him all those years ago and right now, after he stood up for me tonight, I trust him even more.

He pulls onto a small quiet road after driving us for almost twenty minutes. We're just outside of Storyview Falls on the far side of the cliffs from Gus's apartment where a local river runs into the sea. I've heard that's where Storyview Falls got its name, but Isa tells me the real falls are on the Wellington estate.

The drive leads to a small, modern house. I look at it in the darkness. The moonlight and a few outdoor lights illuminate the lines of the dwelling.

"Where are we?" I ask as Chase parks his car.

"My escape house," he replies, opening his door and walking around to mine.

He opens it and holds out a hand. I accept it and he keeps my hand tightly in his as he leads me up to a door. He unlocks it with a code, and I step inside.

"Is this house made of...cargo containers?" I ask as I look around.

He grins. “It is. It’s six of them. Two bedrooms. Two bathrooms. And I can always add more. It’s modular. A friend of mine designs them. My grandfather gifted me this parcel of land years ago and I never knew what to do with it. Then my friend asked if he could experiment here with a house idea and the rest is history.”

I laugh. “Wow. I have good friends, but none of them have built me a house.”

“Maybe you need to make more friends,” he says. His eyes don’t leave mine. His intense stare unnerves me a little. Is this a fuck pad? Oh God, I’m so stupid. Did he just bring me out here to fuck me?

“Do you bring lots of people out here?” I ask, unable to keep the question to myself.

“No. You’re the first,” he answers as he opens the refrigerator and pulls out some champagne.

“I’m your first guest?” I reiterate.

He nods as he pours me a drink and pushes the flute toward me. “Well, I’m honored to be your first guest, Mr. Marino,” I state as I hold up my glass to his. He clinks his against mine and we both take a sip, our gazes still locked. I’m the one who caves, looking away to examine the room. Part of the house is two stories high and it’s beautiful with expansive windows that must provide an amazing view back at the falls. Several trees are blocking the view from the other side of the cliffs, which explains how I never knew anything was out here.

The part of the house we are in is one story. The kitchen is large for a small house with granite countertops and dark wood cabinets that are almost black. It’s modern and clean. I wonder how often he comes here.

“Are the bedrooms upstairs?” I ask.

“One is and one is just on the other side of this wall,” he says as he walks me through an open door. There’s a bathroom and on the other side of that there’s a bedroom.



“This is nice. Bigger than I expected,” I say as I take in the king-sized bed.

“The upstairs room is slightly bigger, but it’s the balcony upstairs that I love the most,” he explains. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

I follow him up a narrow staircase to a small landing where there is a door. He opens it into a large bedroom with a bathroom off to the side and even a small walk-in closet. But when he opens a sliding door onto the balcony, I pause. It seems like it has no railings.

“They’re made of glass,” he explains as he takes in my look of concern. “Come on, it’s perfectly safe.”

He holds out his hand and I step forward tentatively. Is now the time I tell him I’m scared of heights? Maybe I was cool with them as a kid, but now, not so much.

I plaster myself against the wall.

“I swear, there’s a glass railing,” he promises and taps his knuckles on it. “See.”

I swallow. “I’m good right here.”

Chase steps forward, placing his body between me and the offending glass that seems to not exist. His finger presses my chin up and my gaze locks with his.

“You were never afraid of heights when we were kids,” he muses.

“I wasn’t on the edge of a rocky cliff with seemingly nothing between me and sudden death,” I mutter.

He grins. “I won’t let anything happen to you, Eleanor.”

I swallow again. I want to say *then don’t let me fall for you or stop being so sweet that I forget you’re a billionaire playboy*. But instead, I just continue to stare at him.

“Why don’t you live out here?” I ask, trying to distract myself with conversation.

“I may, someday. I only finished this place a few months ago. And I like being closer to my grandfather. He’s not been

well lately,” he explains.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize he wasn’t well,” I say as I bite my lip.

“He’ll be alright. Ella...” Chase trails off and I’m suddenly nervous as fuck.

“W-why are you named Chase?” I stammer.

He laughs. “What?”

“Like, why Chase? Your dad and grandfather have Italian names,” I blurt out, my nerves causing some sort of verbal diarrhea that won’t stop.

“Uh, I don’t know. I think my mom picked our names. Chase was her mom’s maiden name and Tate was her grandmother’s maiden name. You’ll be pleased to know that my middle name is Giovanni,” he explains.

“Oh, that’s cool,” I say as I lick my lips nervously.

Chase runs a thumb over my wet bottom lip. “I do believe I’m making you nervous,” he says, his voice turning low and gravelly.

“N-no,” I splutter.

We’re so close now. All I see is Chase’s face. I’m no longer cold from the blowing wind or scared by the see-through-glass deck wall. I’m fixated on Chase’s brown eyes which seem exceptionally dark out here.

“Ella, I want to kiss you. I want to take you inside. I want to slowly take these clothes off you. And then I want to pleasure you in every way I know possible,” he whispers, his breath caressing my skin.

Jesus! Do men really talk like that? All the ones I’ve been with haven’t.

I should say no. I should leave. I shouldn’t cross this line, but every cell of my being wants everything he just said. Shit. I can’t do this. No, I can do this. I can separate my feelings and wanting to get fucked six ways to Sunday. I haven’t had sex in...well, way too long. And even then, it was with my

college boyfriend, and it wasn't that great. Chase though, Chase definitely knows what he's doing. It'll be like a life experience. Yeah, that's it.

"I think I want those things too," I manage.

The words are barely out of my mouth when Chase's lips crash against mine. He kisses me with ten times more intensity than at the charity event. Our tongues slide against one another's. He kisses how I imagined I'd be kissed when I was younger. Like he owns my soul, like we're connected physically and emotionally.

His hands come up and grip my ass and I wrap my legs around his waist, seeking more, wanting to feel him everywhere. He carries me inside, sliding the door closed with his foot. I'm vaguely aware that he's walking us to the bedroom on the main floor.

Somehow a dim light turns on, illuminating the ceiling above the crown molding. But I'm only half-aware as we continue to kiss. I slide down his front, my feet touching the tiled floor. When he pulls back, I feel my body leaning forward as if I physically crave the connection with him.

"Too many clothes," he mumbles as he begins helping me divest of each article of clothing. When I'm left in my underwear, he steps back and looks me up and down. I'm so thankful that I have on decent underwear tonight.

I still blush under his appraising stare.

"You're gorgeous, Ella," he states before stepping forward and reaching around me. He expertly removes my bra in two flicks of his fingers. Shit, I can't even remove it that fast. Then his thumbs hook in the sides of my panties and he drags them down my legs. He's left kneeling on the floor in front of me. His head inches from the apex of my thighs. Fuck, why is that so hot? It's like he's worshipping me. He leans forward and presses his nose against my neatly trimmed pubic hair. Should I have waxed down there? He doesn't seem to mind as his nose travels farther down, sliding along my damp skin.

His hands slowly travel up my legs. His thumbs separate my folds, and he leans forward, glancing up at me as his tongue darts out and licks my clit. Holy fucking shitballs!

I was not prepared for how hot that would be. He watches me as he licks and sucks at my most intimate parts. I should be mortified or, at the very least, slightly embarrassed. I've never had a man do this before. My college boyfriend was nice and all, but he wasn't into "going down" on women. I suppose that should have been a red flag, but it wasn't until years later.

"You taste amazing," he murmurs against my wet flesh. "I need more. I need you on the bed," he says with a hint of urgency.

My knees wobble as he abruptly stands and helps me to the bed. I fall back on the firm mattress, and he crawls onto the bed between my legs, pushing them apart. He leans back down and continues what he had started on the floor. This time, he adds two fingers to the mix, slowly working them inside me and then pushing in and out before curling them and flicking a spot inside me that I didn't think a man could ever find.

"Oh, God!" I cry out as I feel myself start to lose control.

"That's it, Ella. Come for me," Chase whispers and then licks his tongue rapidly against my clit as his fingers scissor inside me.

I feel my muscles clench just before I spiral into the abyss, crying out his name in the process. The room seems to go perfectly still as I sink into the mattress.

Chase slowly pulls his fingers free and then peppers kisses along my thighs, stomach, breasts, and neck.

"I could never have imagined a more perfect woman," he murmurs into the hollow of my collarbone.

"You're crazy. I'm not perfect," I say, my eyes still closed.

I feel him shift. I'm fairly certain he's taking off his clothes, but I'm too spent to open my eyes to check. Then I hear a drawer open and close, followed by a rip of a foil packet. A moment later, I feel his erection at my entrance.

My eyes fly open. “But...I...don’t you want me to...” I trail off lost for words.

He smiles down at me as he takes my thighs in his hands and pushes them farther apart.

“No, Eleanor the Great, I need to be inside you, right now,” he says, his voice strained. I stare up at him in wonder. He remembered his old nickname for me.

I’m lost in thought for a few seconds until I feel the head of his cock slide inside me. I haven’t seen all of him, but I’m fairly certain he’s too big. There’s no way this can work. It defies the properties of physics.

“I—I don’t think—” I start but he cuts me off.

“It’ll fit. Let me make this good for you, Ella. Relax,” he encourages softly. He’s slow as he pushes in a little at a time, giving me seconds to acclimate before he goes farther. And then he slides to the hilt and we both groan.

“See, a perfect fit,” he manages before pulling all the way out and slamming back inside me. I let out a strangled moan as my body starts to meet his in a perfect rhythm.

“Don’t stop,” I urge as I grip his shoulders.

“Never. Going. To. Stop,” he grunts with each thrust.

“Oh God...oh God, oh God!” I cry out as he pushes hard and fast inside me. He leans his head down and sucks on one of my nipples and I lose it. My body trembles and convulses under his touch. He owns my whole being and I never want it to end.

I don’t know how long I come for, but when I finish, all my muscles relax. I open my eyes and see his are dark and I know he’s holding out, but I don’t know why.

“Again,” he commands.

“Chase,” I start.

“Again,” he cuts me off as he reaches between us and presses a thumb against my clit.

If this man thinks...holy shit! He pinches my clit and I fucking go off like a canon.

“Chase!” I scream, this time my body goes absolutely fucking rigid and Chase’s thrusts go into turbo overdrive, prolonging my release as he roars through his.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Chase

It takes all my willpower not to crush her beneath me. I brace myself on my elbows with the last of my strength and press a gentle kiss to her lips.

“That was...” She trails off.

“Fucking amazing? Perfection? A religious experience?” I ask, smirking.

She giggles and pinches my side. “You’re an ass.”

I run my nose along hers. “But you like me anyhow.”

She rolls her eyes. “You clearly do not have a self-esteem problem.”

I purse my lips and pretend to consider it. “Nope. I guess not.”

She laughs. “You are incorrigible.”

“Perhaps,” I murmur as I lean in to kiss her again. Her lips are swollen and plump against mine. She sighs and I grin against her lips.

“I think it’s bath time,” I whisper.

She groans. “I’m too tired.”

“Come on,” I urge as I gently pull out of her and dispose of the condom. I hold out my hand and she takes it, letting me

help her out of bed. I bring her into my arms and kiss her again.

“Well, when you ask like that,” she mutters against my chest where she places a kiss.

“I’ll even throw in bubbles,” I tease.

“Wow, a real Prince Charming,” she quips with a laugh.

I walk us toward my bathroom, the one I didn’t skimp on. The shower is room size and has a tub against one wall.

“I can’t believe you have a bathroom like this in such a small home,” she says as she looks around while I fill the tub.

“I spend the most waking moments in my office, kitchen, and bathroom. So, that’s where I spent my money,” I explain as I pour in soap that creates blankets of bubbles in the tub.

She frowns as she leans against the tiled shower wall. “But you don’t have an office in here.”

“I don’t. I’m having a small container made off-site that will be connected to the main house by a walkway. I wanted it in a separate space, so it felt like leaving my home,” I tell her as I hold out my hand. She places hers in mine and I help her into the tub. She sinks down and I smile at her. She looks like a child in the oversized tub surrounded by bubbles.

“Aren’t you getting in?” she asks, her head leaning to one side in confusion.

I nod and settle myself on the opposite side of the tub.

“You don’t strike me as a tub kind of man,” she says.

Shrugging, I pull her toward me. She settles on my lap, her breasts pressing against my chest. “With you in here with me, I am feeling very confident about the decision to add this tub,” I say with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes. “You really are a playboy, aren’t you?”

Frowning, I feel my jaw clench. Is that what she thinks of me? Just another rich playboy? I don’t like that. I know the reputation I have. I’m not oblivious to the tabloids, but I would



have expected Ella to see past all of that. She knows the real me. She knows Ace.

Her facial features morph and I can't tell if she's regretting saying that out loud or if she feels bad about saying it. "I mean...I could tell you are...experienced and I'm...clearly not," she stammers as she looks down.

I cup her jaw, and she looks back into my eyes. "I don't care how experienced you are, Eleanor. That doesn't matter to me. You're perfect, just the way you are." Is she jealous of the other women that have been with me? No. She has nothing to be jealous about. None of them meant anything to me. She should understand that, shouldn't she? She's looking down again.

"I've only ever dated two women seriously," I state. Her eyes fly up to mine once more and widen.

"What?" she squeaks, her body shifting in the water, making it splash against the sides of the tub.

"I dated in high school, but no one serious. Then I met a woman in college, and we dated for a year, but I broke it off. I wasn't ready to be serious. Then I dated a second woman about four years ago. I thought she might be the one, but she didn't like how much time I spent working. We started fighting all the time. And one day, she said, *it's me or the company* and...well, I suppose you can guess how that turned out," I say.

"The company won," she whispers the silent part out loud. Her answer has me feeling a little bad that I did that, but it was the right thing to do.

"Yep. And since then, I don't date, at least not seriously," I explain.

"Oh...well, I don't date either," she says, her words coming out rushed and I wonder how true that is.

"I don't," she repeats, this time her words seem more confident.

"If you say so," I reply as I lather soap on my hands and gently caress her skin. I take my time on her breasts. Our

conversation ceases as we explore each other's bodies. Her hands run over my pectoral muscles and down my abdomen. She brushes against my erection and my body tenses with pleasure as I cup her breast, my thumb running circles around her nipple.

She glides herself over my cock and we both moan.

"Are you on anything?" I ask as I run my lips over her jaw.

"No...I...don't normally..." She trails off and I watch as a blush creeps up her chest to her neck and cheeks.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, Ella. I just want you to know that I'm clean and I trust you. We'll use condoms, OK?" I say gently as I kiss her jaw and cheek.

"OK," she whispers, barely audible.

I help her up and we dry off before walking back to the bed. I grab another condom and she eyes my drawer suspiciously. I realize then that she's got to be wondering why I have these.

I roll the condom down my length and look over at her as I climb onto the bed, settling between her legs.

I motion to the drawer. "I do normally keep one in my wallet because you never know, but these were a housewarming gift from my brother, Tate. He's the only person who knows I built this out here, other than my friend, of course." She raises an eyebrow.

I shrug. "Tate's...special."

She giggles. "Is that so?"

"Yep," I answer, letting the "p" pop.

"So he knows about this place?" she restates as I settle myself at her entrance.

"He does."

"How come I never met Tate when we were kids?" she asks.

I slowly slide inside her and both of us moan. I take her thighs and press them against her chest, letting me slide deeper.

“Because I wanted you all to myself,” I whisper as I begin to move inside her. I lean in closer, so our lips are nearly touching. “I still want you all to myself, Ella.”

I slide in till my balls slap her skin. My cock twitches inside her and she groans.

“Move, please,” she begs as she attempts to thrust up, but she’s sandwiched by my body with her legs bent and crushed against her.

“I like feeling you wrapped around me, Lady Eleanor of the Woods,” I tease, using another nickname from our childhood. She’d requested I call her that one day when she was playing at being a princess in our treehouse.

She giggles and her muscles undulate around me.

“Fuck, Ella,” I grunt as I start moving, needing to chase my release.

Her laughter stops abruptly, and her body begins to tremble as I press hard, giving her clit much-needed friction. It’s been less than two hours, but I’ve used every second of them to figure out her desires, and her needs. I’ve never been this compelled to please a woman before. I love pleasing women, but this is next level.

I want so much more with her. But I know I can’t have it. I have too much riding on my business idea. I need to concentrate on that. My grandfather needs me to keep his company going in the right direction.

“Hey.” Ella’s voice brings me out of my thoughts as I feel myself pounding into her at a rapid rate, chasing something more than my release.

My eyes fly open, and I slow down a little.

“Where’d you go?” she asks gently.

I swallow. “Just a lot going on. Sorry,” I reply as I lean down and kiss her slowly. I internally curse at myself. This is

our first night together. I shouldn't be worried about where things are going between us. I should just enjoy this moment and make sure she enjoys it.

I focus on the feel of her body and respond to each of her movements and cute little sounds. God, she's so fucking perfect! It's like I dreamed up the perfect woman, and the universe dropped Ella into my life, again.

"Oh God, don't stop," she cries out. I feel her body tremble and it pushes me over the edge just as she calls out my name, her hands gripping my arms.

I lean back, bringing her up onto my lap and we both sit there breathing and looking at each other for a few moments.

"I think we need a shower," I announce as I wrap her legs around me and stand. I carry her into the bathroom.

"If we're going to keep doing this, maybe we should hold off on the shower," she suggests.

I chuckle as I turn the water on and dispose of the condom.

"We need sleep, Ella. And I always get hot, so I like to shower before bed," I explain.

"Oh, OK," she says as she steps in and lets me wash her. I let her wash me, allowing her once again to explore my body. I love how her touch is tentative even after the past few hours. I press a gentle kiss on her shoulder.

I turn off the water and offer her a towel. We dry off and step back into my bedroom.

She glances around. "Uh, do you have like a shirt and some socks here that I could borrow?" she asks before biting her lower lip in that nervous tic she tends to have.

"I do...or you could just sleep naked," I state as I open two drawers and point to them.

"Do you sleep naked?" she asks as she grabs a sports t-shirt and a pair of socks.

"I do," I answer as I watch her put on my shirt that seems to swallow her up. The socks are loose on her feet as she

shuffles into the bed.

“How do you sleep with socks on?” I ask, sliding into bed next to her.

“How do you sleep without socks on?” she asks in mock horror.

“Uh, quite well, thanks.”

She groans and gives my side a little shove. I pull her against me, and she rests her chin on my chest and looks up at me.

“Seriously, aren’t your feet cold?”

“Nope. Like I said, I sleep hot. I don’t want anything on me. Just the blanket and sometimes I kick that off,” I explain.

“You’re a monster!” she says.

I tickle her side and she laughs, trying to pull away, but I pin her with my opposite arm. “I’ll show you a monster,” I tease.

“Ace! Stop!” she yells in between laughing.

I roll us over and crawl down her body, shoving my shirt up around her breasts. I lean down and kiss her lower belly, and she stops laughing.

“I thought we were done for the night? Don’t you need sleep?” she asks.

“I’ve decided sleep can wait, Ella. Unless you’ll be turning into a pumpkin at midnight, I’d prepare for a long night of me exploring your body and showing you exactly how much I enjoy being your fake boyfriend,” I say. She tenses when I say “fake,” but then relaxes as I use my thumbs to open her folds so I can spend the next hour worshipping her properly. I need to keep this from turning into something more, but this woman is completely addictive, and right now, I’m giving in to my needs. I’ll worry about the rest later.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Ella

“He doesn’t even wear socks to bed,” I say to Gus as Elisha brings us a second refill of our coffees.

“Uh, who wears socks to bed?” Elisha asks.

“Normal people.” “Cool people.” Gus and I speak simultaneously.

Elisha laughs just as the doorbell chimes and in walks Isa. “Settle this debate. Socks or no socks to bed?” Elisha asks her.

“Oh, uh, socks...but now that I think about it, Adam doesn’t wear socks,” she says with a frown.

“You are no help,” Elisha says. “Your order is on the counter. Get your sock-covered feet back to the library.”

Isa laughs. “Damn, who would have thought socks would be such a controversy. What about you all?”

“No socks,” Elisha says. “Socks!” Gus and I both yell.

Isa keeps laughing. “Wow! OK, then. I’m just going to take my coffee and go.”

“I’ll have cookies for you later. I made extras and the order got changed,” she says with a sigh.

“I’ll stop by after work,” Isa calls out as she leaves.

I turn back to Gus who is now engrossed in what I assume is a text conversation with David based on the smile plastered

on his face. I tap my finger on the table, and Gus looks up from his phone.

“Impatient much?” he asks with a raised eyebrow.

“I need advice!” I whisper-yell.

“You *need* a therapist,” he states and then finishes typing his message and hits send. He sets his phone down and takes a long sip of his coffee. “Girl, you clearly like this fake boyfriend. And you all just...ya know...and I sort of think maybe he might be more than a *fake* boyfriend.”

“I don’t think so. He keeps mentioning that we are fake and how he can’t have a girlfriend and has only had like two girlfriends ever. That doesn’t exactly scream let’s get married or even let’s be serious,” I mutter before stuffing a cookie Elisha has brought over into my mouth.

“You all haven’t even been dating for two weeks. Give him time,” Gus encourages.

“I guess,” I huff as I swirl the foamy milk in my coffee.

“Just let him figure it out. He’s not going to change overnight. Just think how far you’ve come in a few weeks,” Gus points out with a motion of his hand as if I’m being unreasonable.

“I know. I just...” I trail off not wanting to admit that I’m falling for Chase. That little Ella already had fallen for Ace, and now that I know Chase and Ace are the same person, I’m more confused about my feelings than ever. Until that day with the vase, I thought Chase was just a spoiled, billionaire playboy. But now, I see he’s anything but that.

“Stop looking so confused. Chase is a man. We aren’t that complicated, I swear,” Gus says.

I roll my eyes. “You are the most complicated person I know,” I reply, giving him a pointed look.

Elisha laughs from behind the counter. “Gustavo, she has a point.”

“Whatever. I’m an anomaly,” he says with a flourish of his hand.

I laugh, nearly spitting out a mouthful of coffee. “That’s definitely true,” I manage as I wipe my mouth.

“When’s your next date?” he asks.

“He wants me to go out with him tonight,” I say as I take another bite of cookie.

“Did you find a gala dress yet? You only have a little over a week to get one,” Gus asks.

“No. But Greta said to come to see her about that, so I guess I’ll swing by her place first,” I explain as I finish the cinnamon raisin cookie.

“Let’s go now,” he suggests.

“Now?”

“Yeah. We have time,” he states as he stands.

“Later, chica,” he calls out to Elisha.

“Later, Snookie bear,” she says with an air kiss.

I groan. “You two are ridiculous.”

Gus laughs. “And that’s why you love us so much. Come on, text Greta.”

I pull out my phone as we leave and text her.

Me: Hey, remember when you said you might have a dress for the gala? Any chance I can stop by now?

Greta: Of course. Just getting some admin work done. Come on over.

Me: Thanks. Be there in a few minutes.

“She’s there,” I say as Gus and I walk the several blocks to Greta’s house which is just the upstairs and back of the big old house in front of my garage apartment. The front few rooms are her business offices.

I walk inside without knocking. “Honey, we’re home,” Gus calls out.

“Up here,” Greta calls out from the second floor.



We make our way up the grand staircase and meander toward a small bedroom that she converted into a giant walk-in closet.

We step inside and both of us freeze.

Hanging on a hook in full view is the most beautiful blue dress I've ever seen. It has a pink sash around its empire waist, small pink beading around the bottom of the skirt in some sort of floral pattern, and some more beading around a simple sleeveless scoop neckline. I walk up to it, almost afraid to touch it. I notice then that there's a butterfly made of little crystals along the skirt's floral pattern.

"It's perfect," I murmur.

"I know. Didn't you say you have some fancy heels with a butterfly design?" she asks.

I nod. The heels I inherited that were my mother's.

"Yeah, they are embedded with tiny crystals and then a big butterfly crystal on top. They'll go perfectly with this dress," I state as I reach out and touch the chiffon.

"It's your size," she adds as she steps forward.

"How? I mean, why do you have this and are you sure you want me to wear it?" I ask.

She laughs. "Yes, of course, I want you to wear it. It was a gift from a very special man, a very long time ago. But sadly, I never got a chance to wear it. So, I think you should do the honors," she says as she wraps an arm around my shoulder and squeezes it.

"Thank you," I whisper, leaning my head on her shoulder.

She kisses the side of my head. "Of course, my dear. I'm just glad I could help."

"You always help," I say.

"I will always try to help you, Ella. That's a promise," she replies.

I turn and hug her. "I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I'm grateful I have you," I whisper.

“OK, that’s enough sappy drama for the day. We need to get you a hair and nail appointment,” Gus states.

My eyes widen as I pull back. I hadn’t even thought of that.

“Oh, for the love...you have to get your hair and nails done. And...” He motions to my crotch.

I place a hand over it.

“No way,” I state. I mean, Chase didn’t say anything about my, uh, landscaping. I’m fine, right? I feel the color seeping into my cheeks.

“Oh my God, we have so much work to do,” Gus grumbles.

“Now, now, Gus. Our girl is perfectly beautiful just the way she is. Oh, to be young and naturally gorgeous by society’s standards. Those were the days,” Greta laments.

“Whatever, if I look half as good as you in ten years, I’ll be thanking the beauty gods,” Gus says with an eye roll. He’s not wrong. Greta does look amazing for her age. She has to be in her mid-sixties but she looks closer to fifty.

“How old are you, anyhow?” Gus asks.

Greta laughs. “Dear boy, I’m old enough. That’s all you need to know.”

I giggle.

“I need to go. I have to be at the Pascals’ house for a job and then I have a date,” I say as I walk toward the hallway.

“Remember, you’re worth it,” Gus calls out.

“Yep,” I manage, half believing it.

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I’ve showered but I still don’t feel clean. Should I have gone to get a Brazilian today? God, has Chase even seen pubic hair

before mine? Mortification overtakes my senses and I spend five solid minutes grooming my nether regions.

“What am I doing?” I ask myself as I set my electric razor on my bathroom countertop.

I shake my head just as my phone pings with a message.

World’s Best Boyfriend: Be there in a minute.

I grin like a schoolgirl who’s about to go out with her crush. Then, I frown. I can’t get too carried away. This is purely fake. Right? Fuck, I have no idea what we are. Maybe I should start our date off with that conversation.

My head goes back to the mission at hand. Tonight’s date is a low-key party at his parents’ home. It’s in celebration of his grandfather’s birthday. Heather had the perfect dress for such an occasion, and I had matching shoes, which is highly unusual. Sadly, the shoes were purchased for a funeral of a friend’s parent last year, but maybe this will give them better vibes.

I take one more look in my mirror and head downstairs just in time for Chase to be pulling into the driveway. I see a curtain in Greta’s house sway, and I wonder if she’s keeping tabs on me.

I walk toward the car and Chase exits, walking up to me and pulling me into a hug.

“Hi,” he says with a smile.

“Hi,” I say back as I nervously put my weight on one foot and then the other.

“You look lovely,” he adds.

“Thank you,” I reply, trying to just accept a compliment for once in my life. Ugh! I feel so awkward tonight.

He pulls back after placing a quick kiss on my lips and places his hand on the small of my back. Why does that simple act give me goose bumps?

He opens my door and I take a seat in his car, noting that he already had the seat warmers on for me. I watch him walk

around the car and get inside.

“How was your day?” he asks as he pulls out of the driveway.

“Oh, you know, had coffee with Gus, found a dress for the gala, and then went to work,” I say as if it was a totally routine day.

“A dress, huh?” he asks as he glances over at me.

“Yes. I know you probably had something in mind, but I have these vintage shoes and Greta had this incredible vintage dress. I think you’ll approve,” I add hastily, afraid I’m disappointing him. Geez, what if he had something picked out already?

“I can’t wait to see it,” he says with a smile, and I relax. I should relax. This is all fake. This is all fake, right?

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Chase

My mother has gone overboard for the party. Of course, she has. I would expect nothing less. I'm hoping this encounter with my parents will go more smoothly than the first. My parents are...difficult. They are not like my grandfather who is openly caring. But I know they love me in their way. I mean, they did go out of their way to get me into a good college after I fucked around at my boarding school and almost got expelled for sleeping with the dean's daughter. We were both drunk at an off-campus party. It was bad and it got leaked to the media and was a nightmare.

That's when I started to become guarded about dating. My college girlfriend was great but she couldn't handle the paparazzi that followed us all over the city constantly.

And then there was my last girlfriend, Carly. She's the reason my playboy public image is likely burned into everyone's retinas including Ella's. Carly was in love with me for my ability to get us into exclusive clubs and concerts. When I suddenly didn't have time to take her to clubs, she gave me an ultimatum between her and the company. I had every reason to want to work, but in the end, I didn't have any more reasons to stay with her.

That's half of my reason to remain without a girlfriend. But when my grandfather got sick a few years ago and decided to retire, it lit a fire under me. My father was never interested

in running this company, but I am. Dad wants to play it safe and stay on our original course and I know we can't, not if we're going to be competitive in the long term. So working on a new direction for us has consumed me for the past three years. I've spent most of my time out here in Storyview Falls instead of my city apartment, so I can be close to Nonno and also focus on my new shoe idea. And I know it'll consume me for the next few years as I work to hopefully implement my plans once I'm voted into the CEO position.

I glance over at Ella who's taking in the scene before us. She's so...different. She wasn't like other girls when we were kids and she sure as hell is not like the women I've been around as an adult. Could she even fit into this crazy world that I call mine? I wouldn't want her to change a thing about herself, but I also wouldn't want her to be stifled by it.

"Wow," Ella says as she looks over at the two-foot-tall birthday cake sitting on a circular table in the corner of the room.

"Yeah, my mother likes to go a little overboard for birthdays, but this is pretty low key for us," I explain as I motion around us. It's not a huge party, nothing like the gala we'll be holding in about a week. I think we're having maybe fifty guests and a cocktail reception with a string quartet with some food being brought around. There will be a champagne toast soon and Nonno will make a quick speech and cut his cake. As far as Marino parties go, this is low key.

"*This* is low key?" Ella asks, her eyebrows shooting up her forehead.

"Uh, yeah," I reply as I look from her to our guests.

"Well, I can't wait to see what you do for the gala, then," she says with a frown as if the gala is going to be some sort of coronation ball.

"It'll be on a grander scale for sure," I warn her.

She swallows nervously and I take her hand in mine. She looks up at me. "You alright?"

Nodding, she opens her mouth to speak but a server with a tray of champagne descends upon us and we both accept a glass just in time for my father to clink a spoon against his champagne flute. The room settles down and focuses their attention on him.

“Welcome, everyone. I want to thank you for coming today to celebrate my father’s seventy-sixth birthday. Papà, we are so proud of you, and we wish you many more happy birthdays,” he says as he claps while holding his glass.

Nonno walks over to Dad and Mom and turns to our guests who are a few close business colleagues, two of our neighbors, a few family members, and a close circle of Nonno’s friends who he golfs with once a week and vacations with once a year.

“Thank you all for coming to celebrate this old man’s birthday,” he starts and there’s a round of chuckles from the guests. I watch Ella instead of Nonno. She’s beaming at him, and he makes eye contact with her and widens his smile.

Something about that connection they seem to instantly make is unsettling to me. My girlfriends never connect with my family, and I like it that way. It makes it easier when we part ways.

“I could give you a big boring speech, but I won’t. Instead, enjoy yourself and each other. Every day we have here on earth is a blessing. Salute!” He raises his glass, and everyone offers him praises and hollers their birthday wishes as a giant candle is lit on the cake and then we all sing happy birthday. He blows out his candle and cuts a piece before turning the knife back over to a server who begins making quick work of slicing pieces for everyone.

I watch as Nonno walks over to us, bypassing my parents who give each other a look. I can’t tell if they are impressed by my fake girlfriend’s ability to draw my grandfather’s attention or if they are annoyed by it, but either way, I find it amusing.

“So good to see you, Ella,” Nonno says warmly as he steps up and does the double-cheek-kiss thing that he never stopped doing when he left Italy years ago.

Ella blushes. “Happy birthday, Mr. Marino,” she says. “I may have a little surprise for you at the stables.”

My eyebrows rise as I look at her. She didn’t tell me about a surprise.

“Oh?” Nonno replies with a wink. “We shall have to go over there tomorrow and see it, then.”

“I have work tomorrow, but I could meet you there the next day,” Ella replies, smiling up at him.

“Then, it’s a date,” he declares and then looks at me. “You don’t mind if I steal your girlfriend for an afternoon, do you?”

Inside, there’s a small part of me that screams, *stay the fuck away*, but that irrational part is quickly tapped down. “Of course not, Nonno.”

He pats my cheek just as he has done since I was little. “You’re going to make a fine leader, Chase. I look forward to watching you take Marino Shoes to the next level.”

“I’ll do my best, Nonno.”

“I know you will. Now, you two go get some cake before it all gets eaten. I picked the flavor myself. Can you believe your mother gave me such power?” he jests with another wink.

“What’s that about power?” my mother’s voice calls out as she walks over to us just as a server takes our empty drinks.

“I was just letting them know that I got to pick the cake flavor and I do think it is quite delicious,” he says. “I’m off to rub my golf win at Freddy. He’s still bitter,” he adds with a laugh as he turns to his friends.

“You really should try the cake. I was hesitant to let your grandfather pick it, but this bakery makes the best cake flavors, so you really can’t go wrong,” Mom says.

“Elisha’s?” I ask.

“Of course. And it’s so convenient. Her assistant dropped it off this morning.”

“I’ll have to give her a hard time. Elisha’s a friend of mine, but she didn’t mention she was baking you a cake,” Ella says



with a frown.

“Oh, you know her? And I wouldn’t feel too bad about that, I make our service providers sign NDAs. You just never know when someone will go to the media,” Mom says.

“Oh. I see,” Ella replies. I can tell she’s hurt that Elisha hasn’t said anything. I would have told her if I knew. My parents are so secretive about everything, and I feel partly to blame for that.

“Ella, nice to see you again,” my father says as he walks up to join my mother. They are often together at these events as if they have to prove they are a happy couple even though I know for a fact their marriage is far from perfect.

“Nice to see you, too,” she says, giving him her best smile, the one I’ve noticed she gives to people when she doesn’t know what else to do. It’s like a defense mechanism. I can’t help but wonder if she found that skill from being Nancy Foster’s stepdaughter.

“I didn’t realize you were Nancy’s stepdaughter,” my mother adds as though she’s read my mind.

“Oh, uh, yes,” Ella says, as she nervously clutches her hands in front of her and then promptly releases them.

Great. Nancy must have spoken to my mom.

“You’re Patrick’s daughter?” my father asks, and I can tell by his tone he suddenly has an interest in my girlfriend. I wonder what that’s about.

“Yes. He was my father,” she answers. I can tell she’s uncomfortable speaking about her family.

Just then, Greta walks in and gives me the perfect excuse to leave my parents with my date.

“Oh, it’s your good friend Greta. We should say hello,” I say as I take her by the hand.

“Well, you two will have to join us for brunch again this weekend. I’d love to hear more about you, Ella,” my mom says as she looks from Ella to me.

“That would be really nice. Thank you,” Ella replies before I practically drag her across the room while my parents watch.

“Shit. Do you think Nancy said something stupid?” Ella whispers to me.

“Probably, but we stick to our story. OK?” I reply and she nods. We’re about twenty paces from Greta when Nonno walks over to her and pulls her into a hug, kissing her on the lips.

We both stop walking and stare at them.

“What. The. Fuck,” Ella says not so softly.

“My sentiments exactly,” I state.

“I’m so glad you could be here, Greta,” Nonno says as he pulls back, his smile beaming and his eyes twinkling. Wait. Do eyes actually twinkle? Because that’s exactly what it looks like.

“Happy birthday, Lorenzo,” she replies with an equally big smile.

We start walking again, and when we get a few feet away, they both turn to look at us. Then they look back at each other.

“You know him?” Ella asks Greta.

Greta looks a little sheepish and nods. “I do.”

“Nonno, I didn’t know you knew Greta,” I state in confusion.

Just as I’m about to start up the Spanish Inquisition, another older woman bursts into the room like she’s the start of a film.

“Marie!” Nonno says happily as the woman walks over and double-cheek kisses him.

“Lorenzo, happy birthday, my dear,” Marie says.

“Who the hell is Marie? Wait. Do I know her? She looks familiar,” I say to no one in particular.

“Oh, that’s Greta’s friend,” Ella explains. “She owns the laundromat on Second Street. We saw her in the garden at the

tennis club.”

“Oh, right. Do you know everyone in Storyview Falls?” I ask.

“I didn’t know your family, now did I?” she whispers back to me.

“You knew me,” I remind her.

“That doesn’t count. I didn’t know I knew you,” she states under her breath.

“Ella, are you here with Chase?” Marie asks as she pulls back from Lorenzo.

“Ella’s dating Chase,” Greta says, playing along because I know without a doubt Ella has told her some variation of the truth. I feel my shoulder tension release a little knowing she won’t rat us out.

“Oh, how lovely,” Marie says. “Chase here is a real catch. It’s nice to see you again,” she adds, glancing toward me.

What the hell? I don’t even know this woman.

Greta waves her hand. “Marie, Chase is one of our town’s most eligible bachelors. But he also has a good head on his shoulders just like his grandfather. Isn’t that so, Lorenzo?”

Nonno pats my back. What the hell is going on here? I feel like I’m in an episode of that old show *The Twilight Zone*. “My grandson is indeed a great man. I’m very proud of him. And Ella is a lovely young woman. I think they make a great pair.”

Ella blushes under my grandfather’s praise.

Marie leans in toward Ella. “I bet he’s great in bed, too,” she whispers way too loudly.

Ella’s mouth falls open and I press my lips together to keep from laughing because this entire situation is so fucking ridiculous.

“You’re embarrassing her, Marie,” Greta hisses.

“So, are you two dating?” Ella asks as she motions from Greta to Nonno.

“We’re...I mean...we just...” Nonno stumbles over his words which is entirely not like him.

“Ella, my dear, a woman never kisses and tells,” Greta answers like she’s some kind of nineteen fifties movie star. Perhaps Greta and Marie are more similar than I thought.

“So that’s a yes,” I read between the lines.

“That’s none of your business,” Nonno says as he protectively steps toward Greta. Shit, this whole fake relationship thing is getting more complicated by the second. Of all people, I definitely don’t want Nonno to know that I’m not actually dating Ella.

“Well, Nonno, we’ll let you catch up with your guests,” I say as I try to figure out a way for us to leave this party as soon as humanly possible.

Nonno gives me a shoulder squeeze. “Why don’t you go show Ella the west wing?”

I nod and Nonno gives Ella a pat on the cheek. “Get some cake before you go.”

“We will,” she replies, and I place a hand on her lower back and guide her to the cake table. We grab plates and then I lead her down the great hall.

“I assume you’ve seen the whole estate, yes?” I say as we walk away from the party.

“Seriously? You want to discuss the layout of your house right now? My freaking boss, who knows this”—she motions between us—“isn’t real, is dating your grandfather who thinks this”—she motions again between us—“is very, very real.” Her voice rises an octave on the last word.

“We just need to get through two more weeks,” I state as I take a bite of cake. And shit, it is really good cake.

“Fuck, Elisha’s really good at baking,” Ella says my thoughts out loud as she chews on a piece of cake.

“She really is,” I agree.

“OK, focus. Forget the damn cake. What are we going to do?” Ella whispers.

I lead us down two hallways to the back part of the house. The part that no one really goes to.

“Where are we going?” Ella asks.

“West wing,” I declare. “Haven’t you been in here?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Just the main part of the house where they are cleaning everything for the gala. Your parents’ private quarters and yours.”

“Oh,” I say suddenly realizing just how freaking big this place is. Fourteen thousand square feet is a lot to clean.

“And my stepmom is talking to your mom about us? That’s not good, Chase. This whole thing could blow up in our faces,” Ella says as I open one side of a giant pair of double doors.

We step inside and Ella stops moving. I watch her take it all in. The grand library.

“Wow!” she says as she twirls.

“My great-grandfather loved books and left them to my grandfather. He brought them all with him when he left Italy,” I explain. “And then he bought more over the years.”

“I mean, I knew Adam Wellington had an impressive library, but this is amazing,” she says as she continues turning in circles. It’s not as grand as Adam’s but it’s two stories of bookshelves. A few desks sit along one wall and there are giant stained-glass windows on the far wall.

“May I?” she asks as she points toward one of two ladders that glide along the shelves. I hold out my hand for her plate and motion for her to go ahead.

She grins and steps onto the ladder and then pulls herself along four sets of shelves. She giggles and holds her hand out as she moves.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” she admits with a laugh.

“Isa should get them installed at the library,” I say.

She nods and climbs down. “Wow.” She spins around again and grins at me. “Thanks for showing me this. It’s cool.”

“You’re welcome. Feel free to borrow any books you want.”

“Really?” she asks as her fingers trail over the spines of the books nearest her.

“Of course.”

“Holy shit, you have all the original Nancy Drew books?” she asks as she pulls one off a shelf.

“I guess. My grandmother loved that series,” I explain because I’d completely forgotten about it until now.

“I’m going to borrow this. If that’s OK,” she adds as she holds it up.

“Sure.”

She sits down on a wingback chair by the windows and looks up at me. I set the plates down on the nearest desk and lean against a shelf.

“We’ll be fine,” I assure her, already knowing what she’s going to say.

“But...what if someone finds out?” she asks.

“They won’t, and in two more weeks, it won’t matter anyway,” I point out.

“If you say so, I just don’t like it,” she says as she twirls a piece of her blonde hair around her finger, a motion she’d done when we were kids.

“Ella, it’ll be fine.”

She looks up at me and her eyes look a little misty. I lean down and place my hands on the arms of the chair.

“But what if Nancy ruins things? She hates me,” Ella says, her bottom lip quivering.

“I won’t let her.”

“Y-you don’t know her, Chase. She’s evil,” Ella says as she wipes at her eyes.

I place a hand on her cheek and look into her eyes.

“It’ll be fine. I promise you. It *will* be fine,” I say, mostly to reassure her but also to reassure myself. We’re so close to the board voting. I just need a few more days. And then...well, we’ll see what happens. I don’t want to let Ella go, but I know I can’t keep her, at least not right now.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Ella

I scrubbed Mr. Lambert's tub for twenty minutes straight yesterday before I realized what I was doing. Why do I care if Chase's plan falls apart? He won't rat me out. Plus, the replica vase he found is identical. I'm fine. Right? I can trust him. I think. No, I can. Because Chase is Ace. And I'd trust Ace with my life. I mean, he literally saved it once.

I tug on an old pair of riding boots that Greta gave me a few days ago. Well, I'm pretty sure it was her. I found them on the landing outside my door. She won't fess up to it, but who else would gift me riding boots?

I still need to talk to her about her Lorenzo relationship thing. I walk to Elisha's café so I can get a coffee before meeting Chase to go see Lorenzo at his stables. Maybe I can sneakily ask him about Greta?

"The usual?" Elisha asks as I walk up to the counter.

"Yep," I reply as I drop some cash on the counter. She slides it back to me.

"It's your fifth cup this month. It's free," she says.

I give her a pointed look because we both know I already got my free fifth cup last week. She shrugs and walks over to the cappuccino maker. I look around the café. It's pretty empty at the moment, so I take a seat at the small bar area at the end of the counter and wait for my drink.



“Greta’s seeing Lorenzo,” I burst out not able to withhold the information any longer.

“I’m sorry, what?” Elisha asks, pausing her movements as she stares at me.

“I went to Lorenzo Marino’s birthday party this week.” I pause and give her a look and she blushes. “And Chase and I were talking to his parents and then, out of nowhere, Greta walks into the party with her friend Marie,” I start.

“Marie? The friend we swear dated a mob boss in New York and also overwinters at some senior citizens’ swingers club in Miami every year?” she asks.

I nod. “Yes. That one. Anyhow, Greta never said anything to me about dating him. Chase was also surprised. And Greta and Lorenzo were all super nonchalant about it.”

“Have you talked to Greta?” she asks, continuing to make my drink.

“No. Not yet. But now my imagination is running wild with scenarios of why Greta is with Lorenzo. Were they past lovers? Did she have his secret baby? Maybe Lorenzo had a brother and Greta was with him and then he died and before he died he made Lorenzo promise to take care of her?”

“Whoa. First, you need to take a break from reading romance novels. And second, Greta doesn’t have kids. So, I think it’s safe to say the *secret baby* idea is out. And third, I’m pretty sure Lorenzo doesn’t have a brother who died. Anyhow, you should just talk to Greta. She’s an open book. I’m sure she’ll tell you all about it. And I’m sure she had her reasons of why she didn’t mention it before,” Elisha assures me.

“Right. Just like you told me about how you made Lorenzo’s cake?” I ask.

She sighs and hands me my drink. “I signed an NDA. I couldn’t say anything. The Marinos are good customers, and I can’t afford to lose their business.”

“So, I’m taking a wild stab in the dark here. But hypothetically speaking, if they had a giant charity gala at their

home, would you *hypothetically* be providing baked goods for it?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Hypothetically."

"Oh, for the love of God. This town is like a freaking six degrees of separation on steroids," I whisper-yell as I place my forehead on the cool stone counter.

The bell chimes but I don't look up. I need another second to pull myself together.

"The usual, Chase?" Elisha asks.

My head pops up and smacks into something. "Ouch," I mutter as I rub the back of my head but suddenly a hand covers mine.

"Are you OK?" Chase asks, stepping around me.

"Yep. Sorry, I didn't realize you were right behind me," I say.

"It's fine. You ready to go?" he asks before sipping his coffee.

"Yeah. I'll see you later," I say to Elisha as I slide off the stool.

"No more conspiracy theories," she states, pointing a finger at me.

I roll my eyes. "No more lies by omission," I reply.

She smirks. "Rich, coming from you."

I groan. She has got to be kidding. I'm never going to live down this whole fake relationship thing.

She chuckles as we walk out. Chase gives me a look of confusion.

"You don't want to know," I say as I walk over to Chase's car, and he opens the door for me. Normally, I'd be all independent woman, but I've grown to like this chivalry. Something about him caring enough to open my car door is endearing.

He gets in and starts down Main Street.

“Did you ask your grandfather about Greta?” I state because again, I can’t help myself.

He looks over at me. “No. Why?”

“ARGH! Aren’t you going crazy with curiosity?”

He laughs. “I mean. I’m curious, but I think I’m going to make it.”

I turn to him and glare. “Oh, come on! You were as shocked as I was. There is most definitely a story there.”

“I’m sure there is. But it’s not really any of our business, Ella,” he says.

I roll my eyes and turn back to face the road. “Whatever. I know you’re curious. You think Lorenzo will spill it?”

“Spill it?” Chase asks.

“You know what I mean. Tell us what’s going on,” I say, my voice strained by my frustration.

“Ella. Let’s just let it go. If they want to talk about it, then they will. I mean, you’re close to Greta. Ask *her* if you’re so curious,” Chase says.

“I would, if she’d return my calls,” I mutter, crossing my arms like a petulant child.

Chase pulls up to the stables and Lorenzo walks out, leading a beautiful dappled gray horse that I didn’t see the other day.

I open my car door before Chase can get to me and walk up to Lorenzo and the horse.

“I brought you your gift,” I start as I pull out a tin of cookies I had Elisha bake for the horses. “Special horse cookies. And people can eat them too if you want one.”

Lorenzo laughs. “I love it. Thank you,” he says warmly as he accepts them.

“Who’s this beauty?” I ask as the horse leans forward and noses my shoulder. I giggle and pet his neck.

“This gentleman’s name is Ridgley,” Lorenzo says as he pats the horse.

“Well, you are a real looker, Ridgley,” I whisper. Ridgley gives a low whinny and I laugh as I run my fingers down the soft hairs of his nose.

“He’s yours,” Chase says from behind me.

I frown and look at Lorenzo, who’s smiling down at me, and then turn to Chase who’s also grinning.

“I’m sorry. I think I was hallucinating. What did you say?” I ask, my hand not moving until Ridgley moves, forcing me to continue petting him.

“He’s yours, Ella. Merry Christmas,” Chase repeats.

“No, I can’t. Seriously, I *can’t*. I...horses take a lot of time and money,” I stammer over an explanation.

Lorenzo waves a hand in the air. “No worries, my dear. You don’t have to pay a dime. And we’ll board him here,” he says, motioning to the stables behind him. “He’ll be cared for and available to you to ride whenever you like.”

My mouth goes dry, and I feel a little light-headed. Memories of Gunther come flooding back to me. The feel of his brown coat beneath my fingers. I begin to shake and Chase steps up behind me as everything goes black.

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“Ella. Ella! Wake up, beautiful.” Chase’s voice is the first thing I hear. I open my eyes and find myself lying in his arms. Ridgley is sniffing my knees and Lorenzo is down next to me on my other side.

“Are you alright, Ella?” he asks in a very grandfatherly tone.

“I—I’m f-fine,” I manage as I try to sit up, but Chase’s strong arms keep me plastered to him. I’ve got to stop passing out around him. Elisha swears I lose consciousness so easily because I never eat, but who has time or money for food these

days. Thank goodness that woman pushes her pastries on me every chance she gets.

“Easy, Ella. Take it slow. Nonno, can you grab her water,” he asks.

“Of course, stay down there,” Lorenzo commands as he gets up, fairly gracefully for his age, and walks into the stables.

I look up at Ridgley who is staring down at me...with concern? Could an animal I just met be concerned about me? Man, did I hit my head?

“You’re lucky I was able to catch you. Are you sure you’re OK?” Chase asks, and I look up at him. He’s very handsome from this angle. His strong jawline clenched. His dark eyes searching mine. His bicep bulging beneath his shirt.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I...it’s just a little overwhelming,” I admit as I struggle to sit up. Chase finally lets me, and we both sit staring at each other until Lorenzo arrives with the water.

“Here,” he says. I go to reach for the water at the same time Chase does and my head hits his chin.

“Ouch,” we both say at the same time.

“Oh,” Lorenzo says as he steps back and looks at us.

“What?” we say again in unison as I rub my head and Chase rubs his chin.

“That’s good luck. In the little village where I was born, there’s this legend that if two lovers collide, they are meant to be together forever,” he says with wide eyes.

“Nonno, it’s a silly legend from a tiny village. And we didn’t really *collide*, we just bumped heads,” Chase says, handing me the water.

I take a sip and look between them. “Yeah, it’s no big deal,” I agree.

Lorenzo shakes his head. “I think it might be. I know you have concerns about having a horse, Ella. And I’m sorry we sprung him upon you. Chase saw him and said he’d be perfect

for you, and I couldn't resist buying him. But please, take him out for a ride. I'll keep him as mine if you like or Chase can, but you always have the right to ride him whenever you like," Lorenzo assures me.

Chase's hand squeezes my shoulder, and he places a kiss on my cheek. "Keep him, Ella. Riding makes you happy. And I like seeing you happy." I fight the tears in my eyes. No one has openly said they like seeing me happy in years.

"Thank you," I say as I manage to get up. I hug Chase and give him a quick kiss. Then, I hand Chase my water and I walk over to Lorenzo, hugging him. His arms wrap around me, and he places a kiss on the top of my head.

"You are most welcome." He leans down and whispers in my ear, "You make Chase very happy. And that makes me very happy."

I crane my neck and look up at him. He has the same warm eyes as Chase. "Chase is a good man. Just like you."

Lorenzo blushes a little. "You're a kind soul, Ella. You deserve to be happy. Your father would want that."

"You knew him?" I ask as I step back.

He nods. "Of course, he was my neighbor. He was a good man, Ella. I didn't recognize you before, but when my son mentioned who you were and said your last name, well, I see a lot of him in you now."

I smile sadly. "I'd love to hear more about your friendship with him someday," I say.

"Anytime. He'd be very proud of you," Lorenzo says as he reaches out for Ridgley's lead and hands it to me. "Take our boy for a ride."

I laugh. "Well, when you put it like that."

"I'll grab a horse," Chase says.

I watch Chase walk into the stable. Fuck, why does he have to have the most toned backside I've ever seen? I shouldn't be attracted to my fake boyfriend. This is bad. Very bad.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Chase

“Do you miss it?” I ask, motioning to the house in the distance.

“Sometimes,” she answers. She stares at it, and I wonder what she’s remembering. Good memories? Bad ones? Maybe I shouldn’t have brought her here today.

Ridgley shakes his head and Ella leans down, wrapping her arms around his neck. He makes a contented noise. I’m glad they are bonding. Horses seem to soothe her. I wish I knew what happened to Gunther. I’ve put out feelers for him, but so far, I haven’t found him.

“Ridgley seems to be enjoying our ride,” I state.

She turns her head toward me and smiles, nodding but not speaking. I sense her sadness and it’s killing me. She’s normally so bubbly and happy. I feel like I’ve been bringing out the worst in her, or at least sad feelings. I decide right then and there, we need to do something fun. I have a million things to do today. I have calls to make, I need to catch up with Ward, and my dad’s sleazy assistant, Ken, is trying to set up some sort of meeting, but I want to bail on all of it. I want to spend the afternoon with Ella.

“Do you have work later?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, not till tomorrow morning,” she says.

“Come on,” I say as I nudge Rook and we take off across the field and back through the forest. I can hear Ella and Ridgley in tow, and I smile as I hear Ella laughing and talking to Ridgley as though he’s her best friend. She used to do that with Gunther. I’d forgotten that until now.

We don’t talk much as we put our horses back into their stalls. A stable hand comes by to help us, but Ella waves him away, wanting to tend to Ridgley on her own. I let her and then lead her to my car.

“Where are we going?” she asks as I pull out onto the road.

“A surprise,” I say as I drive us back toward downtown Storyview Falls.

She looks out the window, and as I pull up to the bowling alley, she laughs. “Bowling?”

“Yep,” I state.

She claps her hands. “You are so going down!”

“Oh, a secret ace bowler, huh?” I reply as I park and walk around to get her car door. I secretly like that she’s letting me open her door for her. I’ve been trained since birth to do these things for women, but it’s different when I know Ella is perfectly capable and independent enough to not want someone opening her door, yet she humors me. I wonder why.

We walk into the bowling alley, get some shoes, and settle into seats in front of our lane after she spends way too long picking a ball, something about it needing to be perfect.

She types in our names on the screen and turns to me with a grin. “You ready to have your ass kicked?”

I smirk back at her. “Prepare for war, princess.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Ladies first,” I motion to the lane.

She walks up to the lane and spends a moment lining herself up before she sends the ball sailing straight down the middle of the lane and knocks over every fucking pin.



She turns before the last pin goes down, and when she hears it fall, she winks at me and sits down.

“Your turn,” she says sweetly as she bats her eyelashes at me.

“Oh, prepare to go down. It’s on like Donkey Kong!” I say as I pick up my ball and expertly release it. Unlike Ella, I watch as all my pins go down.

“Well, looks like I have a competitor,” she says before getting another strike. She brushes against my leg as she goes to sit down. “Your turn.”

I feel her hand brush my thigh and I glare at her. “I know what you’re doing,” I mutter.

“Oh? What?” she asks, feigning innocence.

I give her a knowing look as I stand to take my turn. When I sit back down, she again brushes her leg against mine. This time my cock takes notice. I want her and I want her now.

I glance at the scoreboard and swallow.

She leans over and I feel her breath against my ear. “Don’t even think about it. We’re finishing this game,” she says, her voice husky.

Fuck. Me.

She smiles as if reading my mind and I feel her lips against my earlobe. “I will after we finish.”

Did I say that out loud? I turn toward her and she’s smirking. Where did this confident temptress come from? I like her like this, hell, I like her, period. This woman is my perfect match, in every fucking way.

I take my turn and then we continue to play the world’s fastest game of bowling I’ve ever seen. When I miss one pin on the last frame, she claps and does a happy dance to celebrate her victory.

“Dancing time is over,” I announce as I pick her up and put her over my shoulder. She yelps and giggles, slapping my ass.

“Put me down, you oaf! I have to take these horrible shoes off,” she protests.

I set her down and make quick work of our shoes before I’m hefting her over my shoulder again and carrying her out to my car. I speed through the streets to my beach house. I want zero interruptions. I want Ella and I want her to myself.

Ella doesn’t say anything as I drive, but I feel her looking over at me every few minutes. I pull into my driveway, park, and open the door. She’s already around the car and jumps into my arms, taking me by surprise. I manage to keep us upright as she presses her lips to mine. The instant our skin touches, I feel all my resolve melt away. I need her and I need her now. Consequences be damned.

I manage to press the code into my door and push it open while supporting her fine ass with one hand. We clumsily make it into my bedroom, disrobing as we go. I let her slide down the length of my body, and I fall to my knees, helping her remove her leggings, socks, and boots. Then I rip her underwear off and she yelps.

“Chase!”

“I’ll buy you another pair,” I grumble as I grab her ass and pull her against my face, breathing in her scent as I run my nose along her folds before licking her clit.

Her hands grip my hair and I grin against her wetness. God, I love making her come like this. I keep up my licking and sucking until I feel her body shaking and I pull away.

She groans and tries to push me back, but I get up and grin, trailing kisses along her neck. I undo her bra since I managed to remove her shirt on the way into the room and I push her back onto the bed while making quick work of my last few articles of clothing.

I grab a condom and sheath myself and then crawl between her legs. “Not like this today, princess,” I say as I flip her over and give her ass a light smack.

She lets out a moan and I smirk again. But my smirk falls away as I slide inside her, both of us releasing air from our

lungs as we connect.

I try to go slow. Forcing myself to make long strokes, nearly pulling out of her and then pushing back inside, but again, my resolve crumbles and I lose control. We both begin to move at a rapid pace, each of us fixated on the end goal, on that natural high we need from our release.

My vision blurs and I close my eyes, willing myself not to finish until I feel her telltale signs of an orgasm, and just as I think I can't wait for another second, her walls spasm around me and I let go, grunting through my release as she screams my name.

We collapse on my bed, and I discard the condom, pulling her back against me. I run my hand over her breast and place a kiss on her shoulder. She snuggles against me, pushing her ass into my softening erection. I nuzzle her hair, smelling her shampoo that reminds me of an apple orchard in the fall. She feels like home, like how I'd want a home to feel.

My eyelids grow heavy but then my phone begins to ring.

"Shit," I mutter as I crawl off the bed and find it. "I'll be right back. It's my dad's assistant, Ken."

I shut the door and walk out to the main room, running a hand through my hair. "Yeah?" I answer.

"You better not be pulling any shit," Ken hisses.

Who the hell does he think he's talking to?

"Ken, you better have a fucking good reason to be talking to me like that and especially at this time of day. What the fuck are you going on about?" I ask.

"An order for textiles sound familiar?" he asks.

Shit. My dad and his staff weren't supposed to know about it. I knew they'd try to talk me out of it before I had a chance to present to the board.

"Oh, yeah. It's a favor for a friend. A special order that could lead to some regular business and I didn't want to miss out on it," I lie.

“Which friend?” Ken asks.

“None of your business,” I state.

“It is my business. I’m literally paid to make it my business,” Ken snarls.

Jesus Christ. This man needs a strong fist to his face. As much as my father drives me crazy, his assistant is like the anti-Christ. I have no idea why Dad keeps this two-faced prick on his payroll other than the fact that he’s loyal to my dad.

“Adam Wellington, if you must know. He has a company event, and he wanted a certain product for his team members,” I continue to lie as I type a quick text to Adam so he’s not surprised if Ken checks up on me.

Me: Ken might call you about a special order for a company event with a certain product from me, OK? Just go along with it.

Adam: OK...care to share with the class?

Me: NO.

Adam: Alrighty, then.

Me: Thanks.

Adam: You owe me one.

Me: (Middle finger emoji)

Adam: (kissy face emoji)

I sigh. “Ken, are we done here? I have things to do.”

“Like fuck that fake girlfriend of yours?” he asks, and I know he’s smirking. That little shit. Also, why does he think she’s fake? How would he even know?

“Ken, that’s none of your fucking business. And my girlfriend is quite real. So fuck off,” I curse as I hang up the phone. Wait till I tell Ward about this! We both can’t stand Ken.

I don’t like how he talked about Ella. Hell, I don’t like that he even mentioned Ella. And I also don’t like how I suddenly feel like I need to go to battle just because a man mentioned

her. I need to tread lightly. I'm walking on a very thin line that separates the me who needs to stay single and take over his family business from the me who wants to make Ella mine forever. I can't let the latter of the two win.

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"Please come over for Christmas," I say to Ella as we lie in bed.

She rolls over and props her head on her hand, her elbow digging into the pillow. "Wouldn't it be weird? I mean, we've only been dating a few weeks. I'm sure your parents would rather just see you."

I lean forward. "I don't care what Luca and Kayla want. I want to spend it with you. Plus, I got you a gift."

She frowns. "Are you wrapping Ridgely up and placing him under the tree?"

Laughing, I cup her cheek, running my thumb over her swollen lips. "No. I have another gift for you."

She rolls her eyes. "You're too much. Remember, *we*—she motions between us—"are fake."

"So? I can still give you presents. It's nothing big."

"But...I didn't get you anything," she whispers.

"Well, I know something you could give me." I smirk as I roll on my back.

She swats my chest playfully. "Oh my God! You're insatiable! Seriously?"

I laugh and pull her on top of me. I cup her cheek. "I mean it. Come over for Christmas."

"I..." She trails off.

"Do you already have plans?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No. I mean, sometimes I stop over at Greta's, or Gus and I will hang out, but he and David

decided to go away on a trip to London. Although they are coming back early to attend your ball. David didn't want to miss it. He had tickets."

"See, you are plan-free. Just come over. It's fairly casual. Only the family, and the staff have already prepared a brunch that my mom puts out buffet-style."

"Wait. Kayla Marino is serving the food?" she asks.

"Only time she does every year. It's her way of *being a good boss*," I say using my fingers to make air quotes.

"Fine, but just for a little while. I don't want to intrude on your holiday," she says.

I pull her face to mine. "You are never intruding on anything in my life, Ella. This request isn't about the fake relationship. *I want you there.*"

She swallows and her eyes glaze over a little. "OK," she whispers.

I smile as I place a kiss on her lips. "Perfect," I reply.

She giggles against my cheek as she kisses me there. "You better not have gotten me a new treehouse."

I chuckle, rolling us over so I'm on top of her. "Why, what would we do in a treehouse?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she quips. But before she can add anything more to that thought, I begin kissing my way down her body. As I reach the apex of her legs, I look up with a smirk.

"How about I show you what *I'd* like to do in a new treehouse?" I say as I lean in and use my lips and tongue to show her exactly what I mean. I wish every holiday weekend could start like this.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Ella

The Marinos' home is decorated to the nines. Wreathes dot the windows with single candles. There are Christmas trees everywhere. Each one has a different theme. Garland is wrapped around the banister of the great hall. And even their fireplace in the back great room has stockings hung on it. A long table in the back of the room has a spread of bagels and cream cheese, pastries, quiche, muffins, fruit, and deviled eggs. A bar next to it has mimosas and bloody Marys.

For once, Luca and Kayla are in clothing that is, dare I say, informal. Lorenzo is sitting in front of a checkers board while holding a glass of red wine. I smile as I see Tate Marino on a tablet screen set in a chair opposite him.

“Nonno, that’s totally cheating. You can’t jump like that,” he says as he points forward.

“It’s Italian rules,” Lorenzo says.

“It is not. You’re such a cheater,” Tate says as he sips a glass of wine.

“Hey, is that your girlfriend?” Tate adds as he looks away from the chessboard.

“Tate, this is Ella. Ella, this is my annoying brother, Tate,” Chase says as he motions to the screen.

“Nice to meet you, Ella,” Tate says. “Sorry it’s not in person but I have a ski holiday planned this week and won’t be

home until after New Year's."

"Nice to meet you too, Tate," I say as I accept a glass of mimosa from Kayla. "Thank you," I add quickly.

"Of course, dear. Tate should be home. I can't believe you planned a ski trip for Christmas. You're lucky we love you," Kayla says to her son.

Luca laughs. "Which girl is on the ski trip with you?" he asks from the far end of the room where he's watching football.

"There's a bunch of us, Dad," Tate answers.

Chase leans in toward me. "Tate always gets away with murder."

"I heard that, asshole. Don't listen to him, Ella. Chase is the golden boy," Tate teases.

"You both are spoiled as fuck," Luca states as he sips a bloody Mary.

"Luca!" Kayla gasps in feigned horror.

"I'm sure Ella here has heard worse, right, Ella?"

"Uh, yes, of course, Mr. Marino," I say as I sip my drink for liquid courage.

"Let's do gifts. I have to head over to Maximo's house," Tate says.

I look at Chase who just whispers, "A cousin of ours."

I nod and Chase leads me over to a tree that's easily twelve feet high. We take a seat on a small bench and Chase leans forward and hands me a small box wrapped in gold-and-green striped paper.

I pause and watch as Kayla, Luca, and Lorenzo all open some gifts. Tate opens his, a watch, and thanks everyone before signing off. Kayla gets a diamond tennis bracelet and a spa day gift certificate. Luca gets a golf trip. Lorenzo is gifted a new saddle and a bottle of Scottish gin.



I look at Chase as he unwraps cufflinks from his parents, a bottle of Italian wine from his brother, and a beautifully carved stone chess set from his grandfather.

“We’ll play later,” Lorenzo says with a wink. “You haven’t opened your gift, Ella,” he adds, motioning to the box in my lap.

“Oh, I...was enjoying watching you all open your gifts,” I admit. I don’t add that it’s been years since I had a family Christmas or that I was having fun watching their joy. I hardly remember what that’s like. And as much as I’m not sure I like Chase’s parents, this morning, they’ve been, not bad, maybe even a little kind.

“Open it,” Chase whispers.

I carefully remove the wrapping paper, not wanting to tear it. It’s a box with a lid. I slowly pull the lid off and then the tissue paper inside. I freeze when I uncover an antique picture frame. It’s beautiful and ornate, but it’s not the frame that has my heart stopping, it’s the photo inside.

It’s of me and my childhood horse, Gunther. I can’t be more than eleven in the photo. I look so...happy.

“What...How?” I ask as I feel tears well in my eyes. I look up and Chase is watching me.

“I’d forgotten that I had the camera with me one day. I was cleaning out some things in my closet a few days ago and stumbled on some old photos that I’d developed in my friend’s photo studio that summer. And there you were,” I say quietly.

“What is it?” Kayla asks.

“Oh, it’s a frame and photo,” I say as I hold them up quickly and put them back down, not wanting to discuss my childhood.

“That’s a lovely frame,” Kayla says.

“I hear you like horses,” Luca adds.

“I do. I always have,” I reply. And just like that, we all launch into the most casual and comfortable conversation about horses. By the time Chase takes me home, I’m shocked

to say that I had fun with his family. Maybe there's more to the Marinos than I had thought. And even though I'm sure this was just a pity invite, I'll always cherish it. I hadn't realized how much I missed family holidays until now. Hell, I hadn't realized how much I missed family.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Ella

“Holy fucking shit!” Gus and Greta both say from behind me as I twirl in front of the mirror. I put my right foot out so I can see my shoes and I grin. I look...good, like really good.

“If that asshat doesn’t ask for your hand in marriage today, then he’s blind,” Gus says.

I turn to him and glare. “Are you crazy?”

“What? If I was straight and I had a fake girlfriend like you, I would most definitely be locking that shit down,” Gus says emphatically.

“Yeah, what he said,” Greta adds.

I shake my head. “You all need to get your heads checked. We are *not* a real item. And this is just one night where we’ll have some fun,” I explain.

Gus rolls his eyes. “Right, like all the *fun* you’ve been having for the past few weeks?” he asks with a knowing smirk.

“Oh, fuck off, Gus. It really was just *fun*. Nothing more,” I say out loud, but in my head, I’m hoping that was more than just fun. I want it to be more than just fun. I’ve seen the little things he does around me. The way he always has to open my car door. The way he steps between me and cars on the sidewalk. The way his hand comes to my back when other people are around and the way he steers me away from people he doesn’t want me near, like Nancy. He protects me, just like

he did when we were kids. But yet, he's still hesitant. He still calls our relationship fake. I don't know why he's holding back, but I know our fake relationship agreement is coming to an end soon and I just hope he'll not hide behind his fears or whatever is holding him back from giving us a real chance. Maybe tonight is the night that'll happen.

"Well, whatever it is, he's going to have to fight men off with a stick tonight because you look like a billion dollars," Gus says. "And he'll also probably need to fight off women too," he adds with a wink.

I laugh. "You're crazy. But thank you."

A horn honks outside and I peer out the window. There's a long, sleek black limousine in the driveway.

"Did one of you order a limo?" I ask as I motion outside.

Greta wraps an arm around my shoulder and looks out the window. "I did. We should all ride in style tonight."

"All of us?" I ask, my eyebrows shooting up.

Greta nods. "Lorenzo invited me," she says with a conspiratorial grin.

"What exactly is going on between you and Lorenzo? You said nothing to me, and I shared all this...secret information with you," I say finally deciding to rip off the bandage and just ask her.

She steps back and cocks her head to one side as if considering whether she'll answer me or not.

"Greta, I didn't sit in Tara's chair at the beauty shop all morning to look like this only to have you ignore my question. Please, I need to know. You never keep things from me," I beg.

She gives me a sad smile. "Did you know I was friends with Margaret, Lorenzo's wife?"

I shake my head slowly and Gus steps forward to listen.

"We were friends, and when she died...well, Lorenzo and I were both heartbroken," she begins.

“But...I didn’t know you were friends with her,” I interject.

“She and I went to school together. We were very close back then, but of course, we grew up and she had Luca and they were in the city a lot and traveling for fashion shows. She lived this glamorous lifestyle, and I was jealous. We drifted apart, until the very end. And one day she showed up at my door and it was like...all was forgiven. We had the best three months hanging out. Remember seeing that little red car here?”

I nod, vaguely remembering it several years back when I was first living here and was busy with full-time school and working. I suppose I didn’t really pay attention and Greta and I weren’t as close back then.

“Yeah,” I say.

“That was hers. She waited eight weeks to tell me she was dying of cancer. I wanted to kill her right then and there. I was mad. She lied to me. But in the end, I wanted all the time I could get with her. I loved her. She was my oldest and dearest friend. And when she died four weeks later, I just...I didn’t want to talk about her. It was too painful. So, I didn’t. And then a few weeks ago, when Lorenzo figured out you were living here, he stopped by and we chatted, mostly about Margaret. And then he invited me out to his cottage, and we chatted some more. One thing led to another and...I didn’t want to tell you, my dear. I...I didn’t want to complicate things for you any more than they were. I didn’t tell Lorenzo anything about you and Chase. I promise,” she explains.

I fight the tears that threaten. “Greta...I’m so sorry.”

She grasps my hand and gives it a little squeeze. “It’s alright,” she says, wiping a stray tear. “Water under the bridge as they say or something like that. Anyhow, on to happier times. So let’s go.”

“But...your dress?” I ask and then look at Gus. “And tux?”

They laugh. “We’ll be right back,” Gus says, and they both leave while I make my way down the big, curved staircase.

Ten minutes later, they appear. Greta's hair is swept up in a bun with a little jeweled clip in the front. How did she do that so fast? Gus has combed his hair and applied some kind of product. He looks handsome in his tuxedo.

My mouth falls open as I take in their outfits. "Did you sprinkle fairy dust? How did you guys get dressed so fast?" I ask.

"A little magic, my dear," she says as she opens the front door. "Come on, you two, we have a ball to attend."

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"Seriously, how did you guys get ready so fast?" I whisper to Gus as a man in one of those penguin tuxedos opens our limousine door and holds out a hand for me.

"Like Greta said, magic," he replies, and I know he's winking at me even with my head turned.

"Whatever," I grumble. I'm stepping out and using my hands to smooth the skirt of my dress when I look up at the steps leading to the Marino estate's entrance and find Chase standing there. He looks like some kind of superhero because he's backlit by the holiday lights around the giant double doors that are open behind him.

My eyes adjust and our gazes meet. He's staring at me with such hunger in his eyes, that for a split second, I think he might run down here, toss me over his shoulder, and take me up to his apartment to ravage me.

But instead, he slowly walks down and stands in front of me.

"You look...like a dream," he manages as his gaze takes me in from my head down to my covered feet.

I blush under his praise.

"Thank you," I murmur.

He holds out his elbow and I slip my arm through it. He pulls me tight against him as we ascend the steps. I feel his

warm breath on my ear, and I shiver.

“Just remember, tonight, you’re the princess of this ball. No one can touch you, no one except me,” he whispers and I’m pretty sure I die on the spot. Did he seriously just say that? What kind of romance-story voodoo is happening here? Men don’t talk like that, but Chase just did. He keeps doing things like that. Saying the perfect thing or doing the perfect thing. I want to believe this could be my happily ever after, but a small, jaded part of me is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I take a deep breath and nod. He’s right. Even if I’m just his fake girlfriend, no one but a few select people know that. To everyone else, I’m the woman on Chase Marino’s arm. And I need to act that part, even if Nancy is giving me a dagger stare across the grand foyer as she stands at the entrance to the ballroom.

He escorts me into the ballroom, and I smile because of all my hard work over the past month of painstakingly cleaning each crystal on the lowered chandelier that now hangs high from the ceiling and all the crystals on the small sconces dotting the walls of the room shimmer in the lighting, casting beautiful rainbow patterns around the room. It looks like something out of an eighteenth-century novel. The decorations, the men in tuxedos, and women in ball gowns. The small orchestra in the corner and the cluster of tables on the far end next to two bars serving drinks. Holiday decorations tastefully dot the room, giving it a festive feel. Servers make their way around the room with trays of hors d’oeuvres and flutes of champagne. A small podium is in another corner. I’ve heard the attendance is supposed to be close to three hundred people, and I wasn’t sure they’d fit in there, but the way the adjoining room’s doors open to make one giant space proves me wrong. Who has this in their home? The Marinos, I answer my question with a small shake of my head.

“It’s amazing,” I declare as we both stand at the threshold of the room’s entrance.

“Let’s dance,” Chase suggests as he nods to the dance floor.

“Now?” I ask.

He looks me up and down. “Now. I don’t want to miss dancing with you, and right now, I’m not needed for anything.”

I grin up at him and nod. He leads me to the dance floor where a handful of people are dancing already.

“I’m surprised people are already dancing,” I say as he spins me around.

“They’re paid,” he says.

I pull back and look up at him in surprise.

“We pay a few actors with ballroom training to dance so that others will come out to join them,” he explains.

“Wow...I, uh, would have never thought about that,” I admit as we begin moving again. His large hand spreads out across my back, pressing me to him. I feel his erection against my belly and look up at him. The heated gaze is back.

He leans down and presses a kiss to my lips and then whispers in my ear, “If I didn’t have to be here for at least two more hours, I’d be escorting you to my apartment right now. You look ravishing, princess,” he whispers, his teeth grazing my earlobe.

I feel the heat rush from my chest to my cheeks. “Maybe I can have a rain check for that in about two hours?”

He leans back and smirks. “Oh, don’t worry. I have plans for you later.”

I roll my eyes. “Alpha male much?”

He smirks again. “You have no idea.”

I groan. And he laughs. I can see Nancy glaring at us, and I focus back on Chase, trying not to let her get to me.

“Just remember, I know Ace, unlike this lot,” I say as I motion around us with one hand.

“That you do, Lady Eleanor, that you do,” he says and spins us across the floor, making me giggle and forget about



everything and everyone else except for him. He has an uncanny ability of being able to do that.

When he spins me out, his gaze looks down and he stops for a brief moment and then slowly continues.

“Can I see your shoes later?” he asks, his eyes looking down once again.

I frown and follow his gaze, watching my feet for a second. “Do you like them?”

His brows knit together, and I look up at him in confusion. “I do. Very much. That’s why I’d like to look at them,” he says but I feel like there’s more to that. I’m about to ask why when someone taps him on his shoulder.

“Your father needs to speak with you for a moment,” a man says. “Is this the...*girlfriend?*” The man motions to me like I’m some sort of accessory and I immediately don’t like him.

“Ken, this is my girlfriend, Ella. Ella, this is Ken. He works for my dad and is helping out tonight since Ward isn’t available,” Chase says with a tic in his jaw. Just then, Gus and David swirl over to us and stop.

“Ella, I’ll be right back,” Chase says as he gives me a quick kiss on the cheek.

“OK,” I whisper as he makes eye contact with me as if assessing whether I’ll survive a moment without him. I give a little nod and he returns it before walking away in search of his dad.

“Hey, we’re getting drinks, care to join us?” Gus asks.

“Oh, yeah, that’d be great,” I say as I nod to Ken before walking over to one of the bars with Gus and David who are going on and on about the decorations and how great they are and how they remind him of the holiday decorations in Europe. I ask about their trip, and David shares a funny story of Gus looking for the perfect Christmas ornament at a holiday market.

Gus leans in and whispers, “Is there like a little girls’ room somewhere around here so I can powder my nose?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Queen, there is.”

“We’ll be right back, David. Order us both gin and tonics, OK? Muah!” Gus says as he air kisses David, causing David to stop storytelling, and then pulls me toward the entrance to the ballroom. “Which way?”

I purse my lips. I know where the bathrooms are for parties. They literally have bathrooms with multiple stalls in them. It’s insane. But there is a private bathroom down the back hall. I peek around the corner to see if any security guards are there, and seeing none, I take Gus’s hand and drag him to a little alcove where a bathroom the size of my bedroom is empty. I lock the door and turn to him.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I admit nervously as I look in the mirror to see if I’ve turned into a pumpkin or something. I feel like an imposter like everyone can tell I don’t belong here.

“Girl, you’re fine.” He looks at himself in the bathroom mirror. “You look amazeballs. We totally need to rub that in with Nancy and the Shining Twins.”

I give him a look.

“What? Oh, come on. Myra and Mila are creepy as fuck. They are like little Stepford wife mini-Nancys.

“And the way that man just looked at you...there is no doubt he likes you,” Gus adds as he makes eye contact with me in the mirror. I lean against the wall and shrug.

Gus fixes his hair and turns to me. “Come on. We need to make you the belle of this motherfucking ball.”

Before I can protest, he grabs my arm and we’re going back down the hall and into the ballroom. We almost run smack into Nancy.

“Oh, Ella,” she says staring at me with her nose in the air as if I smell offensive.

“Hi, Nancy,” I mutter, trying to avoid eye contact.

“There he is. He’s looking for you. Sorry, Nancy, Chase had to deal with some important business stuff, but he’s looking for Ella now, so we must be off. Enjoy your evening,” Gus says as he again links my arm through his and steers me across the room to the bar where David is standing with three drinks.

“Impressive skills,” I say as I take one of the two drinks in his right hand.

He shrugs. “Party trick. Anyhow, I hear the official welcome speech will begin soon,” David says as he motions to the podium where Luca Marino is talking with someone.

“Lovely,” Gus says as he brings his glass to his lips.

“Hey,” Chase says as he pulls me against him and places a gentle kiss on my lips.

“Hey,” I reply. I feel secure in his arms. Maybe I can do this, at least as long as Chase is with me.

“You’re needed again,” Ken says as he walks over to us, breaking the spell of confidence I just acquired.

Chase groans. “I’m so sorry. I’ll just be a minute.”

“It’s fine,” I lie as I let him go. I know he’s needed, but I could use his support right now. If we were in love, for real, would he always have to leave me like this? Would I be so lacking in confidence? I frown as I contemplate that.

“Where was that bathroom?” David asks Gus.

“I’ll show you,” Gus replies. He leans toward me. “You gonna be alright here for a moment?”

I nod and sip my drink to gather some courage. “I’ll survive.”

“Just remember, you came here with Chase fucking Marino.”

I laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

They head out of the room, and I lean against a small cocktail table. Suddenly, Ken’s standing in front of me. Great.

Just what I need, some putrid man who clearly is an asshole trying to small-talk with me.

I look up to see Luca tapping the microphone. He has Chase at this side, and he smiles at him. I'm sure it's all for show, but that has to be good.

"I can see why Chase is pretending to settle down with you," Ken sneers.

I glance over at him, my eyes widening in shock. Did he just actually say that?

"I'm sorry, what?" I say.

He looks me up and down and I feel violated just by his stare. "Are fake relationships your thing? 'Cause I could use a fake girlfriend when Chase finishes with you." He adds a wink that makes me want to vomit.

I step back. "I'm sorry...Ken, is it? I don't know what you're talking about, but you should leave."

He smirks. "You know very well what I'm talking about. I know all about your little arrangement."

I frown. How is that possible?

"You think Chase wouldn't tell me that stuff? I've known him since he graduated college. He tells me everything. You're just lucky it was me who found out and not his parents. I'll keep it quiet, for a price," he says.

He runs a single finger up my arm.

"I should go stand closer," I say, just wanting to get away from him.

But he grabs my arm and I look up at him.

"You know, he's going to dump your ass after the board meeting next week. He even told his brother that he's getting some ass out of this whole arrangement. I'm surprised Nancy Foster's stepdaughter puts out so easily," he whispers as he leans in. "But then again..."

"Let go of me," I growl as I wrench my arm free and look to the nearest exit. Luca is speaking, saying something about

how proud he is to announce the company's next leader, but I'm too frantic to listen. I need to leave. Now.

I make it to the hallway and run into the bigger bathroom.

I lean on the counter and stare into the mirror. My eyes are red-rimmed and tears are falling from them. I can't go back out there like this.

"Ella?" I turn to see Greta at the door.

And something about seeing her has my will crumbling. She's at my side pulling me into her arms before I can manage words.

"What happened?" she asks. I look around, but we're alone. I pull back and meet her gaze.

"It's all fake. As you know. And Ken just confirmed...I thought...shit. I thought things were real between us now. I felt this connection, but...he told Ken it's all pretend. Ken thinks I just go around fake dating people. He propositioned me, and got all handsy, and..." I trail off as I wipe tears away from my cheeks. "I have to go. I can't stay here."

Greta's hand comes out and cups my cheek. "I'm sorry, Ella. That doesn't sound like Chase, but...why don't you take the limo and go out to my beach condo? You can lie low for a few days and just...think."

She pulls keys out of her small bag and unhooks one from her keychain, holding it out to me. "Here, take it," she says as she places it in my hand.

"Greta...I can't. I have work tomorrow. I should just rip this bandage off, right? Get it over with," I say.

"Hey, don't make rash decisions. Maybe it's not what you think. Did you try talking to Chase?"

"And say what?" I ask. "Oh, did you actually text your brother about getting sex out of the deal? No way. Why would this Ken guy make that up? That's so specific. And the fact that he knew? What the hell? Why would Chase tell him that?"

"Go. I'm texting our limo driver now. He's pulling around up front. I'll stop by later, and you can tell me everything in

detail, OK?” Greta says.

She’s not wrong. I need to get out of here. “OK. But just for a few days,” I say.

“Of course. Text me when you get there,” Greta demands.

“I will.” I hug her. “Thank you.”

She squeezes me harder. “You’re welcome. Now, get out of here.”

I nod and take off toward the front doors. A valet opens the limo door as I rush toward it. And then I hear him.

“Ella! Where are you going? Wait!” Chase yells from the front doors.

I rush to get inside, and my shoe goes flying. I don’t bother getting it. The valet reaches for it, but I just jump into the limo and slam the door.

“Go, please,” I say to the driver who nods and takes off just as Chase reaches the limo.

I watch as the valet hands him my shoe and then I keep watching as he pulls out his phone while staring at me. He gets smaller and smaller with the distance. My phone rings and I turn it off after I text Gus that I’m heading out for the night, and I’ll talk to him tomorrow. I don’t know when I’ll talk to Chase though. I need time.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Chase

“Where the fuck is she going?” I say to no one in particular. I turn to the valet. “Bring me my car.”

He nods. “Uh, yes, sir.” He rushes off and comes back a few minutes later. His face is red, and he looks scared.

“Uh, Mr. M-Marino, your car is...well, we can’t get to it right now,” he stammers.

“Christ,” I mutter as I pull up a car service app and wait for a ride to appear. While I’m waiting, I look down at the shoe in my other hand. I hold it up to the lights along the drive. No. It can’t be. All this time? She had them. I squint, just making out the small carving of my grandfather’s name. For years, my family has searched for the whereabouts of the famed butterfly crystal shoes my grandfather made but never sold. He said he gave them away, but he never said to whom. My father was obsessed with it for a while because those crystals are worth a fortune. Hell, the shoes are easily a million dollars. Does she know?

My phone pings and I look up as a car pulls into the drive. I open the passenger door and climb in, urging the driver to hurry as he takes me to Ella’s apartment.

“Wait! Stop!” I yell before he can pull out of the drive. I look over to see Ella’s friend Gus and his boyfriend, David.

I roll down the window. “Gus!” I scream. He sees me and hurries over.

“Have you seen Ella?” he asks as he looks around the car as if he’s expecting to see her sitting next to me.

“No. She left. Do you know where she’s going?” I ask frantically.

He shakes his head and frowns. “She was just at the bar. I don’t understand,” he mumbles.

David nudges him. “Maybe ask Greta?”

Gus nods and pulls out his phone, typing away. His phone pings immediately and he frowns as he reads the message.

“What is it?” I demand, my voice coming out with more anger than I’d thought.

“She’s...uh, she’s gone?” he answers as if he isn’t sure.

“What did Greta say?” I ask.

“She just said that Ella needed to leave, and it was sort of an emergency situation and she’d be back in a few days.” He pauses. “What the fuck? Hold on, I’m texting Ella again. And Greta.

“Ella’s phone’s off. And Greta says she’ll explain later,” Gus adds.

“Fuck. Sir, can you please hold on a second? I just need to run inside. I’ll be right back,” I say as I pass him a fifty-dollar bill.

“Sure thing, man,” the guy replies as he puts the car in park. I jump out and the three of us take off up the stairs. I search wildly around until my vision locks on Greta. She’s talking to my grandfather. I storm across the room. She sees me as I approach as does my grandfather who steps in front of her.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Ask. Your. Date,” I grit out from behind clenched teeth.

Greta steps next to Nonno.



Her head is held high, and she looks at me like *I'm* the problem. "If you're looking for your date, she had something come up and had to leave. I don't know where she went and I'm not sure when she'll be back."

I run a hand through my hair. I can feel my anger boiling. I need to calm down, I think to myself.

I take a deep breath. "I need to know where she's at, Greta."

"Maybe you should think more about your own behaviors and who you entrust information to," she states with a glare. What the fuck does that mean?

Nonno steps in front of her. "It sounds like she's fine, Chase. Why don't you go and enjoy your evening? I'm sure she'll contact you when she can."

Fuck. I guess I'm not getting answers from Greta, although it's clear that she knows something. I look around us. A few people are watching. I decide more questions can wait. I'm going after Ella.

I turn and head to the car. At the doors of the ballroom, I look back and see Gus talking to Greta. His eyes dart toward me and he looks pissed. He stalks across the room like he's a lion and I'm a gazelle. His finger comes up to my face.

"You stay away from Ella. She's too good for you," he says, his voice eerily low and calm.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?" I growl.

"Maybe you can fuck around with your other women, but Ella is different. She deserves respect. I know you two had some stupid agreement, but that doesn't mean she's without feelings. Maybe you should have thought about that before you went telling all your confidants about your escapades." He glares at me. "You know. At first, I thought you were just a stupid, rich playboy. Then, I thought maybe you had a brain and a heart in there somewhere"—he motions to my body—"but now, I see you for who you really are. Just some lowlife, spoiled kid who wants to have his cake and eat it too."

Go fuck yourself, Marino.” Gus turns and walks off before I can even muster a response. What in the living hell was he going on about?

Shaking my head, I make my way through a group of people all wanting my attention. I manage to say polite quick hellos and then I’m back at the car in the front.

I get in and the driver turns to me. “Same place?”

I nod and he takes off as I stare into the cold night sky. It hasn’t snowed much since the big storm early in the season, but the chill in the air this evening tells me more snow is coming our way. The driver stops in front of Greta’s house.

“Wait here for a minute,” I say, handing him another fifty. I walk up to her apartment over the garage, but the lights are off and she doesn’t come to the door when I knock.

“Shit,” I curse under my breath as I turn and head back to the car.

“Where to now?” the guy asks.

“The café on Main Street,” I say. There’s a chance she might be there. But when I roll up, Elisha has already closed, and the dark café tells me that this is not where she is. We try Max’s and then roam the streets. I eventually have him take me to my place out of total desperation. But she’s not there either. It’s like Ella’s disappeared into thin air.

I debate whether I should stay here or go back to my parents’ home. A text decides for me.

Dad: Where are you? Two board members have asked about you and I haven’t seen you in over an hour. That girlfriend of yours better not be keeping you from business. Business first. Women second.

I want to reach through the phone and punch him. But I also don’t want to miss a chance to win over some board members. I need their votes in a week. I need them to support my idea. Ella is more than what my father thinks she is to me, but for once in his miserable life, he’s right. I need to put the business first. Just for tonight or everything I’ve worked for will be for naught.

Begrudgingly, I ask the driver to take me back. I'll resume my search for Ella as soon as the ball is over. She couldn't have gone far. And even if she did, I would go to the ends of the earth to find her.

I decide to text her.

Me: Ella. Where are you? I tried calling you. I don't understand why you left. Please call me.

When I arrive back at the ball, the guests are thoroughly tipsy, and everyone is dancing and having fun. The lights have been lowered and the orchestra plays holiday songs. It should be festive and fun, but it's not. Everyone is enjoying themselves. Only, that's the last thing I want to do. As I talk with the board members, I look around at the smiling faces. Couples embracing, even kissing on the dance floor. And suddenly, I feel like an idiot. For all my anger at my father always putting the company first, I just did the same stupid thing. I should be out there looking for Ella. Nothing else should matter to me until I find her. Because nothing else *does* matter. Fuck. I'm in love with Ella. And I don't want all of this if it means I can't have her by my side.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Ella

The dim light streaming through the window wakes me. I rub my eyes and roll over, staring up at the vaulted ceiling. Greta's beach condo is nice. I've only been here a few times, but I feel like it's a familiar place. At least I know where things are here.

My tired brain hasn't quite woken up enough to recall the awful previous night. I curl deeper under the comforter as if the warmth of her bedding will protect me from my own thoughts.

I had stolen a pair of sweatpants and an old sweatshirt from Greta's closet. My dress and single shoe are in the dining area. I had to get them off me as fast as possible. I'll have to get the dress dry-cleaned and returned to Greta, but right now, I don't want to think about anything to do with the holiday ball. Hell, I don't even want to think about the holidays. Maybe I should stay here until after New Year's. Then, I can avoid all the lovey-dovey moments with Gus and David. I don't want to be around any couples for at least ten years... fine, at least ten weeks or at the very least ten days.

I look out the floor-to-ceiling window that has a door out to the balcony. It's a cloudy day. The ocean looks gray and angry. It matches my mood.

I'm not hungry but I decide I could use a cup of coffee. I find coffee pods in the cupboard and set about making myself a cup.

I stare at my phone on the kitchen counter. I haven't turned it back on yet. I sort of don't want to, not yet anyway.

A knock at the door startles me.

"Ella? Ella, it's me. Open up," Gus's voice calls out.

Shit. Why did Greta have to tell him where I was?

I open the door and Gus gives me a sad smile. "Hey," he says.

"What do you want?" I grumble.

"Wow. Thanks, I'd love to come in," he replies as he pushes the door open and walks inside.

"Gus, I'm really not in the mood," I start. I glance in the hallway mirror and grimace as I see my puffy eyelids and blotchy cheeks.

He puts up a hand to stop me from talking. "I know. I just wanted to check on you."

The coffee maker beeps, and I take the mug and hold it up. "You want one?"

"What flavors does she have?" he asks.

"Have at it," I reply as I open the cupboard with the coffee pods and take my mug over to the sofa. I sink onto the cushion and stare out at the white tips of the waves as they roll onto the beach.

"You're better off without him," Gus states as he waits for his coffee while leaning against the counter.

I turn and glare at him. "We aren't discussing Chase Marino."

He holds up his hands defensively. "OK, OK. I just thought...maybe you would need to vent."

"No," I say but then the verbal diarrhea begins. "Argh! Why did Ken have to be so sleazy? And what the fuck? Why the hell would Chase tell him about our...relationship? And why would Chase act all nice and bookish boyfriend-like and then just be a total dick?"

“Whoa, slow down there, Miss Out for Revenge. Who the fuck is Ken anyhow?” Gus grabs his coffee cup and walks over to sit down next to me.

I sigh and blow on the hot coffee. “He works for them. He’s like Luca’s assistant or something.”

“And what did he do exactly? Greta didn’t go into much detail.”

I look at Gus and bite my lip.

Gus goes from concerned to ready to murder someone in less time than his car takes to go from zero to sixty. And that’s saying something because his car has some serious horsepower.

“It’s nothing,” I say since I don’t really want to relive that conversation.

Gus places a hand on my leg. “It’s something. Talk.”

Sighing again, I place my coffee down and turn toward him, crossing my legs.

“Well, he sort of propositioned me,” I state.

“He fucking what?” Gus roars.

“Calm down. He’s just a sleazy asshole. He said something about how he knew all about Chase’s and my arrangement and that we had had sex, and he would love a fake girlfriend who put out if I was available after I finish with Chase,” I ramble as I nervously play with the fringe ends of a blanket on the sofa.

“Oh, that prick is a dead man,” Gus says from behind a clenched jaw.

“What are you going to do? Hire an assassin?” I ask, giving him a pointed look. Gus isn’t exactly a fighter. He’s basically a golden retriever. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.

“I’ll figure it out. Death is too kind.” He pauses and cocks his head to one side. “How exactly do you know that Chase told him all of that?”

“Ken said Chase told him.”

Gus stares at me, his jaw unclenching. “Why would he do that?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think Ken could be lying?” Gus asks.

I pick up my coffee again. “Why would he lie? What does he have to gain?” I ask as I consider Gus’s question. I don’t know Ken, but might he have a reason to lie?

Gus raises an eyebrow. “That, Nancy Drew, is a good question.”

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Two cups of coffee later, and we still can’t figure it out.

I throw a pillow across the room. “Forget it. This is stupid.”

“You like him, don’t you?” Gus asks.

I grab another pillow and scream into it. Pulling it back, I look at Gus. “Yes! God! This is so frustrating. I don’t want to deal with this anymore. Are we fake?” I motion with one hand. “Are we not fake?” I motion with my other hand.

“I mean, you were fake. And then, I think you might have become...not fake,” Gus says as he shrugs.

“I wish—” My phone rings and I look down. I had just turned it back on after I made coffee, and now I’m regretting it.

Gus looks down. “You should get it.”

I pick it up and stare for a moment before answering.

“Are you OK?” Greta answers.

Sighing, I put her on speaker.

“I’m fine. Gus is here.”

“Good. Our Gus will take care of you.”

A message pops up from Chase.

World's Best Boyfriend: I don't know what's going on. Please, at least let me know you are OK.

"Is he seriously saved in your phone as that?" Gus asks.

"It was a joke," I state.

"What? What's happening?" Greta asks.

"Nothing," I say too quickly.

"The asshole is texting her," Gus replies.

I suddenly regret letting Gus into the apartment. I just want to be alone. I want to turn off this phone and crawl back into Greta's king-sized bed.

"Are you going to reply?" Gus asks me as he looks from me to the phone.

"No. And I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm done for today," I announce. "Greta, thank you for letting me stay here. I'm OK. I need a few days, if that's alright with you. And, Gus, go home. I'll live. I've survived worse than a little heartbreak."

"A little?" Gus asks with a pointed look.

"Fine. I was falling in love with him. But it's over. We've been here talking this through for two hours and we have no reason to think Ken was lying. I just want to forget about this for a little while. It'll take longer to forget about Chase, but someday, maybe I can. I mean I was just his *fake girlfriend* after all, right?" I say.

Gus gives me his patented raised-eyebrow look that says, *you are being stupid*.

"Don't start. I know this was just a mutual arrangement. I just..." I trail off because I've been round and round on this point for way too long.

"Stop kidding yourself. I saw how he looked at you. You were not just a *mutual arrangement*. I don't know what happened, but I'm on team Ella. So whatever you need, you just tell me," Gus says.



“Thanks,” I whisper, trying not to cry again as Gus pulls me into a hug. But inside, I’m still questioning the reality of everything that happened between Chase and me. And my heart is still breaking at what could have been.

---

“Wake up! You’ve been out here for three days. We need to get you outside.” Greta’s voice wakes me as I hear her pull back the curtains. Sunlight streams into the room and I groan, rolling over and pulling the covers over my face.

“Nope. Not having that. Come on. You had your pity-party time. It’s time to get up,” Greta says as she yanks the covers off me.

“Greta!” I screech, trying unsuccessfully to grab the covers from her.

I begrudgingly open my eyes and blink as I wait for my vision to adjust to the light.

“Come on, up you go,” she encourages as she hands me a coffee from Elisha’s. I accept it and push myself up to lean against the headboard of the bed.

“How about we clean?” she suggests.

“Huh?” I ask.

“OK, I clean, and you get your studying done,” she clarifies.

“I turned in my last paper a week ago,” I state.

“Don’t you have that last class to take?” she asks in confusion.

I nod. “Yep. But it hasn’t started yet.” Greta knows this, or she should. I certainly talk about school enough.

“Right,” she says with a sigh.

“Greta, why are you here?” I ask as I take a sip of coffee.

She sits down next to me. “I was worried about you. It’s not like you to run away from things,” she admits as she pats my leg.

I slouch and look down at my coffee. She’s not wrong. I have many faults but giving up is not one of them.

“Let’s give the kitchen a thorough cleaning. That’ll make you feel better,” she encourages as she crawls out of bed and holds out her hand for me.

I accept it, knowing full well that she won’t go away until I humor her. We walk into the kitchen, and I see that she already has cleaning materials sitting out on the counter.

I set my coffee down and we begin to clean in silence.

I’m scrubbing the sink when she stops and turns to me. “Is it going to be weird with me seeing Lorenzo?” she asks.

I frown. “No. Why?”

She gives me a sad smile. “I just...I don’t want things to be awkward for you.”

“They won’t. I like Lorenzo. He’s a nice man,” I assure her as I begin to scrub again but stop and turn back to her.

“So, are you like, serious?”

She laughs. “Well, I spent the last two nights with him, so...” She trails off.

“Greta!” I say with a laugh.

She throws her sponge at me. “Just because I’m old doesn’t mean my lady bits have shriveled up and fallen off.”

I start laughing and she starts laughing. I don’t know why I find her answer so hilarious, but I can’t stop laughing. Tears stream down my cheeks as I fall to the floor in laughter. She joins me, and eventually, we pull ourselves together.

“Is he...good?” I ask because I can’t help myself. Some sick part of me wants to imagine what Chase and I would be like in fifty years.

She grins and gives me a wink. “A lady never tells.”

“Greta! You aren’t a lady,” I say with a giggle.

“Eleanor Nadine Foster! You are such a brat!” she says while laughing.

I stick my tongue out at her. “Takes one to know one,” I quip.

We both start laughing again. “He’s that good, huh?” I ask.

She gives me a conspiratorial smile. “The best,” she admits.

I give her leg a little shove. “I knew it!” I yell.

As much as I’m still devastated about Chase and me, I’m happy for Greta. She deserves this. And I’m happy for Lorenzo. I hope we can stay friends even if I’m not with Chase. An acceptance of my reality starts to wash over me as we pull ourselves back up and finish cleaning the kitchen. By the time we’re done, I do feel better. We wrap ourselves in blankets and sit out on her balcony, watching the waves crash on the shore as we finish our coffee and talk about all the latest gossip from Greta’s book club, aptly named Sabretooth Smarties Smut Lovers. We spend the rest of the afternoon talking about her latest romance read, her friend Marie’s escapade with a male dancer in Las Vegas, and the time she had a threesome in Paris. Apparently, the vintage dress I wore came from one of the men in Paris who also happened to be a fashion designer.

As the conversation lulls, she looks over at me. “You ready to come home yet?”

“Give me a few more days. I’m going to work on some website design for my business. Can you bring me my computer and some clothes?” I ask.

She smiles brightly. “Of course. But the bathroom better be spotless when you finish out here.”

I laugh. “I’ll deep clean the whole place. It’ll be like I was never here.”

She gets up to go, leaning down to kiss my head. “I like that you were here. I like that I have someone to share my

things with. You're the closest thing I have to a daughter, Ella. I love ya."

I look up at her. "I love you too."

And with that, she smiles and leaves me to my thinking. Maybe I can just return to my normal life. I'm mentally prepping myself to forget Chase when a text pops up.

World's Worst Person: Ella, please text. I'm going crazy with worry.

I laugh at the new name Gus put in my phone. I toss the phone on the other lounge chair. I'm not ready to deal with a fake breakup. Maybe tomorrow.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Chase

I set the shoe on my grandfather's desk.

He stares at it like he's seen a ghost. Slowly, he reaches out almost as if he's afraid to touch it. His weathered hands finally make contact, and he pulls it to him. "It can't be," he whispers as he holds it to the light on his desk to get a better look.

"I'm pretty sure it is," I state as I lean forward, watching the crystals sparkle under the lamplight.

He looks from me to the shoe. "Where?" he manages as he continues to inspect it like a jeweler examining a rare diamond.

"Ella," I state.

He looks up abruptly. "Ella?" he asks, but he doesn't look as confused as I would have thought.

Nodding, I sit on one of the leather chairs in front of his desk. "She wore them to the ball."

"I gave them to your grandmother years ago. When she was ill, I asked about them and she said she had given them to someone as a gift."

"Who?" I ask. I'm surprised he hasn't said more about the shoes before now. My father has always asked about them and been told that Nonno wasn't sure who had them, but that they may have been gifted to someone a long time ago. For a while,

Dad was obsessed with finding them, maybe because he knew how valuable they were, but in recent years, his obsession has waned while he's focused on the company and other pressing matters.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. She wouldn't say."

"That's...weird," I state as we both look at the shoe.

"How much are they worth?" I ask.

"I...I'm not sure. We sold a similar pair back in the day. You could see if they've been sold recently," he suggests.

Nodding, I stand. "Have you spoken to Greta?" I ask.

I hadn't told my family about my breakup with my fake girlfriend who I was falling for, thus making her possibly my real girlfriend who thought she was still a fake girlfriend. I should call Laurel. She's probably the only person who can help me figure out that clusterfuck.

"She said Ella was upset with you," Lorenzo says, giving me an unapproving look.

"I don't know what happened, Nonno. One second, everything was great, and then..." I trail off with a shrug.

"Talk to her," Nonno says.

"I'm trying. She won't return my calls," I explain as I run a hand through my hair.

"Then, go to her," he says. "Tell her how you feel. Whatever it is, she'll forgive you...unless...you haven't been cheating on her, have you?"

"Nonno! Why would you ask that?" I growl because frankly I'm annoyed he'd even suggest that or maybe I'm hurt that my teenage antics still color the lens through which my family views me today.

He shrugs. "I know you haven't exactly been serious with a girl in a while, so I wasn't sure. But I had hoped you weren't like Tate."

"I'm not like Tate," I grumble.

“Good. Then you can fix this. Go,” he says, motioning with his hand to leave. I leave his office with two missions. One, I need to figure out how much those shoes are worth. And two, I need to find Ella.

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After finding the other shoes online from an auction three years ago, I know that Ella’s are likely worth over a million dollars. She’s literally had a fortune at her feet this entire time and didn’t know it. My heart aches for this woman who has sacrificed so much to get what she wants and the whole time she didn’t have to be working, cleaning homes, and living in a small apartment over a garage. Hell, she could have bought her childhood home back.

And why do I feel like there’s more to Nonno’s story? He’s keeping things from me, I just know it. He couldn’t have been that oblivious about these shoes. Everyone always talks about them. It’s been this big mystery for years. So long, that everyone had given up and assumed they were accidentally discarded in the trash.

I decide to take Nonno’s advice. I grab my car fob and drive over to Greta’s house. I knock on Ella’s door first, just in case, but again, she doesn’t answer and all her lights are off.

Taking a deep breath, I ring Greta’s video doorbell.

“Go away, Mr. Marino,” her raspy voice projects from the small box.

“No,” I reply as I cross my arms. “I need to talk to Ella.”

“Not happening. She’s not here anyhow,” Greta replies.

Damn, she’s stubborn. Just like my nonna was. That’s probably why they were friends. I wish I’d taken the time to get to know my grandparents better when I was young, but I was too consumed with breaking rules and acting out to get attention from my parents. And look where it’s gotten me... begging for information at an old lady’s doorstep.

“Will you at least tell me why she left?” I plead as I lean in toward the camera.

There’s no answer for a long moment and then the door latch clicks open. I push it in and find Greta standing on the other side.

“I’m going to tell you and then you’ll leave and never bother her again. Understand,” she says. And I can tell she’s torn between helping me, probably only because of Nonno, and helping Ella who I’ve seen is like her own daughter.

“OK,” I say softly, not wanting to rock the boat before she spills the information.

She gestures toward an antique sofa, and I sit. She sits across from me in some ridiculous chair of carved wood with painted gold accents and satin, striped blue-on-blue fabric.

“You first,” she says as she motions to me with her hand.

“Me?” I ask in confusion.

“She told me a little about how you were *fake* dating, but I want to hear the entire thing from the horse’s mouth,” she says with a pointed look.

“I...” I pause not sure where to begin. “Ella broke a vase, a very expensive one that my mother loves. It was an accident but, well, you know Kayla,” I start, and she rolls her eyes and nods. “I happened to see it occur and it was right after my dad reamed me out and said I needed to date someone and stop being a playboy. I needed an immediate image change, or he wouldn’t support transitioning his company duties to me. I’ve been working on some things, and I can’t risk losing that position and I don’t want to disappoint Nonno. So I suggested an arrangement of sorts. She pretends to be my girlfriend through next week and I would find a replica vase and never tell anyone. I think she was scared of losing the job, which Kayla would have fired her ass for sure. Anyhow, I...” I look into Greta’s eyes. “I didn’t know she and I had been friends as kids. I didn’t know she was so wonderful. I didn’t know her at all and now I do.” I stop because, for some insane reason for the first time in my life, I feel emotional. I didn’t cry when



Nonna died. I didn't cry when I broke my arm as a kid. I didn't cry when my first horse died. I never cry. But right now, I feel tears threaten and it unnerves me.

Greta's stoic face begins to morph as she smiles. "I fucking knew it. You're in love with her, aren't you?"

I nod, feeling like an idiot. "Yes," I reply in a low barely audible voice.

Greta's smile widens. "Good. But why did you tell Ken you were just using her?"

My head whips back as I look at her in shock. "What? What do you mean?"

She tells me what happened. How Ken was a slimeball to Ella, which has me seeing red. And how Ken said our fake relationship was all for looks, which is a lie, or at least it is now. What the hell? How did Ken even know about our fake relationship?

And then I remember. I had set my phone down in a meeting while texting Ella. I'd left my screen unlocked. He was sitting next to me. After the meeting, I had forgotten to pick up my phone as someone was talking to me. When I went back to get it, Ken handed it to me and said he'd found it on the table, and it was a good thing he found it and not someone else. I've always hated Ken, but Dad thinks he's a good assistant.

"He's a dead man," I growl as I stand.

Greta looks a little shocked. "So, it wasn't the truth?" she asks.

I shake my head and take a step toward her. "Far from it. He must have read my texts with Ella. I left my phone on a table at a meeting, and he returned it to me."

"Oh," she manages as she looks up at me.

"Where is she, Greta? I need to find her. I need to explain," I beg as I reach out to gently place my hands on her shoulders as I lean down to look into her eyes. "I...love her."

“Forty-seven Beach Drive, apartment two-o-six,” she states.

“Thank you,” I reply as I kiss her cheek and take off toward the front door.

“Chase!” she calls out and I turn as I open it.

“Yes?”

“She’s hurt. Very hurt. She says she’s all better and doesn’t care, but I call bullshit on that. Just, be gentle with her. She’s been through so much. You’ll need to fight for her. To make her understand because she’ll expect the worst even if her heart tells her she can trust you, she won’t,” Greta says.

“I know. I just need to get her to listen for a few minutes. Hopefully, I’m not too late,” I say as I nod in agreement.

She holds out her hand, motioning me to stop. I pause and look back at her.

“You need to do more than just show, Chase. She needs...a grand gesture. She needs you to do something, not just say something. Actions speak louder than words,” she says.

“How long is she planning to stay there?” I ask.

“It’s my condo. She’s welcome to stay as long as she wants. But I imagine she won’t stay for more than a couple of days.”

“Then, I need to get to work,” I declare.

“Good luck!” she calls out as I shut the door and hastily make my way out her door and back to my car.

I press call on my car’s Bluetooth. “Dial Dad.”

“Chase?” my father answers.

“Dad, we’re firing Ken,” I state.

“What?” he asks, his voice rising an octave.

I tell him everything Greta’s just told me. I come clean about asking Ella to be my fake girlfriend while leaving out the vase part. And I admit my feelings for her. And when I finish, my father is silent. He’s never this silent.

“Dad?” I ask, making sure we haven’t lost our connection.

“He’s a dead man,” Dad says.

I grin. As much as my parents drive me crazy, they love me and the fact that he wants to murder Ken tells me that Ella has somehow started to weasel her way into their very guarded and walled-off hearts.

“I think we can skip the killing and get busy with the firing,” I state as I end the call and pull into the long drive that takes me to Nonno’s cottage.

I can see smoke whirling out of the chimney, indicating he’s home. I park and walk up to his green front door. Knocking, I look around at the cottage, noting where we need grounds staff to do maintenance. I should be checking more often.

Nonno opens the door. “Well, this is a surprise. Come in, come in,” he says as he motions for me to enter. He gives me his usual double-cheek kiss while gripping my face and grinning at me. Damn, I do love this man. For all the lack of affection from my parents, it was always made up for by Nonna and Nonno.

“What brings you out here?” he asks as he walks back toward his kitchen. I smell soup and I take a seat at the small peninsula in his kitchen.

“I need answers, Nonno. It’s important.” I pause and decide that I’m going to be upfront with him. No more secrets. No more lies. Just the truth. “I’m in love and I’m going to lose her if I don’t do something.”

Nonno pauses mid-stir and turns toward me. “Lose Ella?”

I nod, and for the third time today, I tell my story and add in what Greta said. I may make it seem more like Ella and I agreed to go on a date and that led to more, rather than fessing up completely about the whole fake dating thing.

Nonno’s face gets redder as I talk about Ken’s behavior. He curses in Italian under his breath and clenches his hand that’s not holding a wooden spoon. Although, I have a sneaking suspicion that if Ken were here, he would be dead,

and his cause of death would be impaled by a wooden spoon. I finish with the story and explain that Dad is firing Ken as we speak, and then I'm only left with my questions.

"I need some answers, Nonno," I add.

"Answers to what?" he asks, setting down the spoon and leaning against his cupboards.

"How did Ella get those shoes? I know how much they are worth. I looked up the other shoes as you suggested," I explain.

"I wasn't lying when I told you I wasn't sure how she got them," he starts. "I would guess that your grandmother gave them to Ella's mother. She always had a liking for her, and when she got sick, I remember Nonna said something about giving Jennifer a special gift, something she could pass on to Ella someday. But she never said what and I never asked. She was so sad when Patrick died, and Nancy moved the girls. We lost touch with them after that. Although, it sounds like Kayla plays tennis with Nancy on occasion." He pauses and gives me another sad smile. "Nonna had so many friends in Storyview Falls. From the time we bought the property out here, she just made the entire town her family." He pauses and smiles a sad smile, and my heart breaks a little for him. "Anyhow, I'm glad she has them. Solves a big mystery," he adds with a chuckle.

"You don't want them back?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No. They are where they should be. On the feet of a beautiful woman."

I fight a grin. "OK. There's more."

"I knew Ella before," I state.

"Before?" Nonno asks, but it doesn't come out as a confused question, more of a prodding statement.

"I was out riding in the back woods that summer before boarding school and she had fallen and I helped her. We became friends and spent a lot of time together that summer. I know it sounds weird because I was a few years older, but it didn't feel weird, it just felt...good, fun," I explain.

“I know,” Nonno says.

“Know?”

“I saw you kids building that treehouse. I was out riding one day and you two were busy little bees. I let her father know and we had a good chuckle about it, and I figured if you wanted me to know about your new friend, you’d tell me,” Nonno explains.

“Her dad knew?” I ask.

“Yes. It was right before he died. He said you were a good kid because of how you helped find that missing foal that one day.”

I laugh. “I forgot about that. Ella wasn’t there, but I remember looking for it.

“Nonno, who owns the property now? Ella said Nancy sold it after her father died.”

Nonno looks away and goes back to stirring his soup. “Nancy owns it.”

“What?” I ask.

“She put it in a trust. I heard it’s supposed to go to her girls when they turn thirty,” he says. “I wanted to buy it, but she wouldn’t sell it.”

“Wait. Nancy still owns it?”

Nonno nods. “The records are filed at city hall. You should get our legal team to take a look at them. Tell them I want to acquire the property.”

“Is that your subtle way of saying you think the trust is illegal?”

“Let’s see what you can find out,” he says. “But I have my suspicions.”

I pull out my phone and call our lawyers. Maybe I can give Ella more than just a chance to start her dream. Maybe, just maybe, I can give her back her past as well.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Ella

I'm beginning to go stir-crazy. It's been five days since I left the holiday ball. I've cleaned every inch of Greta's condo. I've made food. I've read three books from her small collection she keeps here. I've watched a dozen movies and an entire two seasons of a show. I've reworked my website after Greta brought over my laptop. I've even read all the material on the syllabus for my last class. I haven't slept much because every time I fall asleep, I dream of Chase. I'm vaguely aware that tonight is New Year's Eve, but I don't feel at all like celebrating.

He hasn't called or texted since the day Greta and Gus came by. I'm waiting to feel better. Every night, I think, tomorrow, tomorrow will be the day I forget about Chase Marino. But so far, all the tomorrows have brought are more thoughts and memories of this man who was never mine to begin with.

Placing my hands on my hips, I look around. My eyes lock on the sea. It's calm today. The sun threatens to peek out from behind the clouds. It's time to get back to my life. A new start for the new year.

I throw the few items Greta brought me into my bag and call Gus.

"Can you pick me up?" I ask.

“Where are we going?” he asks, and I can hear David in the background.

“Home.”

“Oh, OK. We’ll be over in like an hour? We were gonna do like a quiet New Year’s Eve if you want to join us,” he says, and I know he must be looking at David for confirmation.

“Sounds good. See you then,” I state as I decide to vacuum one last time and then sit down at the bench by the beach entrance. The condo is small, so ten minutes later, I’m sitting and watching the waves for what seems like the millionth time since I arrived. It’s peaceful. I can understand why Chase built his tiny home by the beach.

I slap my forehead. “Stop thinking about him!” I yell to myself.

“Who are we not thinking about?” a voice responds and I jump off the bench ready to go full ninja on someone.

“Whoa! It’s just me,” Chase says, raising his hands. He’s holding my missing shoe in one hand and papers in the other.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as I plop back down onto the bench, clutching my bag as if that will provide me with some kind of magical force field to repel Chase and his charming ways.

“I just came to talk. I found out some information and I think you have the right to know,” he explains as he walks over to me.

I eye him suspiciously as he motions to the other side of the bench. “May I?”

I sigh and nod. “I’m leaving in a minute,” I say as if that will make him leave faster. Wait. Do I want him to leave faster? Fuck my life.

Suddenly, two teenage boys come running past us. One slows down and smirks. “Hey, Grason, it’s that chick who’s been vacuuming in her underwear! Nice lace panties, lady,” he says and then bolts as Chase stands up, setting down the items he’s holding.

“Run!” the kid yells and they both take off toward the condominium complex.

Chase slowly sits back down. “You were vacuuming in your underwear?”

I shrug. “It was hot with the heat on and cleaning and...I didn’t realize I had spectators,” I say as I grimace.

Chase presses his lips together and I can tell he’s fighting a smile.

“Anyhow, why are you here?” I ask.

He hands me my shoe. “Your shoe.”

I accept it and pull out a t-shirt to wrap around it as I place it in my bag. “Thank you.”

“Do you know anything about those shoes?” he asks, pointing to my bag.

I shrug as I follow his gaze. “They were my mom’s. They were in this box of stuff that Mom had left, and Nancy didn’t want any of her stuff except some jewelry that I know she took. Besides, I don’t think they are Nancy’s size.”

Chase’s jaw clenches. “I see. And where did *she* get them?”

“Oh...uh, I don’t know. I just remember seeing them in her closet when she was sick and I thought they were beautiful,” I explain.

“They are worth a lot of money. Did you know that?” he asks.

I shake my head and frown. “What do you mean?”

“May I?” he asks as he motions toward my bag.

I pull out the shoe and pass it back to him. He turns it upside down and holds it toward the sun that is now making an appearance. The shoe shimmers in the light, the crystals sparkling. I squint and then I see it. A very faint etching. A name. My eyes widen.



“Wait. Are those...” I trail off because I’m speechless. I’ve never noticed that engraving before now. How could I have not seen it?

“My grandfather made these shoes a long time ago. He gave them to my nonna and she gifted them to your mother when she was sick.”

“Oh my God. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Does he want them back? I can give them back to him. I just figured Mom had them because she always had this thing for butterflies,” I explain, the words coming out rushed because I’m embarrassed. I can’t believe I never inspected the bottoms close enough to see the etching.

Chase places his hand on my leg. Part of me wants to pull away but a bigger part feels comforted by the warmth of his touch.

“No, Ella. They are yours. But you should know something,” he says slowly, handing me back the shoe, which I carefully wrap and place back in my bag as he continues. “Those shoes are worth over a million dollars.”

I freeze while zipping my bag. My head shoots up to look into his eyes. “What?”

“Nonno made a second pair that sold at auction last year for just under a million dollars. That pair is more intricate and would go for more than the pair that sold,” he says, keeping his hand firmly on my thigh as if he needs this physical connection as much as I do.

I take a deep breath because I feel like I’m going to pass out. “You’re telling me that I’ve owned a million-dollar pair of shoes and I just wore them to a ball like they were from Heather’s thrift shop?” I begin to breathe faster.

“Hey, it’s alright.” He places his hands on my shoulders. “You’re OK. Take deep breaths.”

He inhales deeply and then I do the same as we stare into each other’s eyes.

“Get your hands off her!” Gus’s voice roars from the parking lot.

I look up and stand as Gus charges forward. “Gus! No! Stop!” I yell but it’s too late. Gus pulls Chase to his feet and lands a punch on his jaw.

Chase doesn’t move. He barely flinches from the hit. He rubs his jaw. “I guess I deserved that in some way.”

“Leave her the fuck alone.”

“Listen, Gus, I appreciate you looking out for Ella, but she needs to hear something. Well, a few things,” Chase says. “Give me ten minutes. And if you want me to leave after that, I’ll leave.”

Gus looks at me and I nod. “I want to hear what he has to say.”

Gus sits on the bench across from us and David walks up and looks at all of us. “Uh, is everything OK?”

We all nod and he slowly takes a seat next to Gus.

Chase opens his mouth to begin saying something when a voice interrupts us.

“Well, it’s busy here today,” Greta says. My head whips toward her voice and I find Lorenzo and Greta walking with their arms linked. What the fuck is happening here?

“Chase was just going to explain something very important,” Gus says, his voice laced with sarcasm.

“Oh, well, let’s hear it,” Greta says as she motions for Gus and David to move over. They take a seat next to them and Chase clears his throat.

“I didn’t expect such an audience today,” he begins, but then turns toward me again. We lock eyes, and for a brief moment, I forget about everyone else. “Ken was fired today. I just got a text confirming it. What he said, Ella, was...well, if I’d heard him, he would be in the hospital. Also, he stole my phone at a meeting and read all our messages. That’s how he knew about our...” Chase glances over at his grandfather. “Our strange beginning to our relationship.”

I swallow nervously. Chase sighs and turns to Lorenzo.

“Nonno, I’m sorry, but when Ella and I started dating, it wasn’t real. I didn’t exactly tell you the entire truth the other day. She was doing me a favor so that I could appease Mom and Dad and get the CEO position. But then...things changed.” He looks back at me. Shit, did his feelings change just like mine?

“Anyhow, I’m sorry about what happened at the ball. I would never let a man speak to you like that. And if I’d known, well...I’m sorry that happened.”

I feel tears threaten. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you a chance to explain,” I say.

He places his hand on my jaw and rubs his thumb over my cheekbone. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Ella. But there’s more.”

I tilt my head a little, perplexed as to what else he could possibly have to say. “The property, your father’s property, is yours.”

“What?” I yell as I stand abruptly, my fists clenched. “That’s not funny, Chase.”

Chase stands and grabs my arms. “I’m not joking. I had our lawyers pull the property information. The trust paperwork was filed with it and it’s not legal. Your father’s will was on file with the county, and he did not leave the property to Nancy. In fact, she was instructed to put that land in a trust for *you*. We aren’t sure how she was able to pull it off, but somehow, she was able to override your father’s will, which isn’t legal.”

“What? For me?”

“Yes, princess. It’s yours. I mean, we’ll need to get some documents filed at the court, but we’ll get it back for you,” he says with a small smile.

“Really?” I ask as the tears start falling.

“Really,” he replies, stepping forward so we are only a few inches apart.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He smiles down at me. “You’re welcome. I know you were upset and if you need more time...” He pauses and I shake my head. “Is that a *no* to the more time or a *no* to me?”

I let out a watery laugh. “It’s a *no* to more time. I missed you,” I admit as I wrap my arms around his waist.

“I missed you more,” he says, stepping closer so our full bodies are touching.

“Can we start again, Ella?” he asks.

“Again?”

“I’d like to take you on a date...as my *real* girlfriend,” he adds.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. Putting on my most serious face, I reply, “I think I’d like that.”

“Great. How’s tonight? Six o’clock? I can pick you up and we can go to Max’s. I’ll call in a favor since it’s New Year’s Eve,” he suggests.

“That sounds perfect,” I reply as he leans down so our lips are almost touching. “I don’t normally kiss on a first date,” I whisper.

“How about an exception since I just made you a millionaire?” he asks.

I give him a little shove in the ribs, and he pretends to be injured. “Ouch,” he says in a fake hurt voice.

“How about an exception because I’m already in love with you?” he says as we stare at each other.

“Y-you are?” I stammer, sucking in a breath because I can’t believe he said that.

“I am,” he declares.

I can’t stop the smile this time. “Good. Because I’m in love with you too. So I suppose that calls for an exception,” I say as I lean up and press my lips to his.

For the briefest of seconds, I forget anyone else is here. I just relish in the warmth of Chase’s arms and his hot breath

and soft lips against mine.

“Woot! Woot!” Greta yells.

“Take it all off!” Gus teases.

“Ignore Gus. Congrats, you two,” David says.

“About time,” Lorenzo adds.

We both start laughing, our turned-up lips still pressed together. “Is this how it’s always going to be?” Chase asks against my mouth.

“I’m afraid so,” I reply as we pull away and glance at our friends and family.

I look back up at him. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I’m the lucky one, princess,” he replies as he pulls me back to him for another smoldering kiss. I can hear the whistles from Gus, but I no longer care. The whole world disappears as Chase makes me the center of his universe. And for the first time all week, I’m excited, excited to start the year with the man I love.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Chase

“Stop pacing,” Ella says. “You’re making me nervous.”

I stop and stare at her. She looks so good that for a moment I contemplate finding an empty office around here so I can take that exquisite pink dress off her and then spend the next few minutes losing myself inside her.

“You got this,” she says, her voice steady and calming. I nod. But I feel like my stomach is doing jumping jacks.

I’ve been practicing for four days for this presentation. Ward must have listened to me at least two dozen times. Ella hasn’t heard me speak of anything but my new shoe line idea since the day after we finally crawled out of my beach house. I had taken her there after our dinner date at Max’s restaurant, and we hadn’t left my bed except for bodily necessities for a full twenty-four hours. We barely registered the New Year, but we had fireworks of our own.

Now, I’m wishing I’d practiced more during that time. I look Ella up and down. Nah, those twenty-four hours were worth it. I grin at her, and she grins back.

Ward walks up with a bottle of champagne.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Pregaming. Obviously,” he says as he pops it open and pours us each a glass.

“Ward, I have to give a presentation any minute now,” I say. “I can’t be intoxicated.”

“You need to calm down. Take a few sips,” Ward says as he urges me to take a glass.

I humor him and take two sips, handing it back. I don’t want to admit that it tastes amazing. Damn him.

“Ward, I got this,” Ella says as she steps between us and wraps her arms around my neck. “Hi there,” she whispers.

“Hi,” I reply as I press my forehead to hers and close my eyes, breathing in her scent. I feel myself relax. I want to laugh. This entire time I was against serious relationships and here my girlfriend just needs to hug me, and I relax and feel ready for the biggest meeting of my career.

“Your idea is brilliant. It’s just what the company needs. We’ve been working on your graphics for the last few days, and everything looks amazing. If you can use even a fraction of the passion you’ve shown me for this idea while you’re in there”—she motions to the boardroom door—“then every one of those people will see just how amazing you are and how perfect this will be for the company.”

“How do you do it?” I ask as I press a quick kiss to her lips. I feel her smile against my lips, and she pulls back a fraction of an inch.

“Do what?”

I shake my head, unsure of how to even explain this. I open my mouth to try but then the boardroom door opens. Ella steps back as I turn to face my father.

“The board is ready for you,” he says as he looks from Ella to me. Since Ella and Ward helped me with this presentation, I invited them to take a seat in the back of the conference room. It’s not my first time pitching an idea to the board, but it is the first time I’ve pitched my very own idea, an idea that could change our entire company. And right now, they are about to vote to officially make me the CEO.

My father asks me to take a seat along the wall and I comply.

“The next item on our agenda is choosing the next CEO of Marino Shoes. Is there a motion?” my father asks.

An older man named Jim Terrance speaks. “I nominate Chase Marino. And I’ll make a motion to hold a vote to elect Chase Marino as the Chief Executive Officer of Marino Shoes.”

“Any discussion on the motion?”

The room is silent.

“Any other nominations?” Dad asks.

More silence.

“Very well. All in favor please say *aye*.”

Every single person, including my dad, says, “Aye.”

Dad turns to me and gives me a proud smile. Holy shit! I’m officially the CEO.

“Seeing as the vote is unanimous and we have a quorum, the motion carries,” Dad says and he turns to me. “Congratulations, Chase.” And then I watch Dad push back his chair and stand. He motions for me to take his seat. I look past Dad to my grandfather who still sits on the board. His eyes glisten with tears and he’s grinning ear to ear. I smile back at him and then look toward Ward, who gives me a thumbs-up. And finally, I look at Ella. She’s not holding back her tears, they are falling freely down her cheeks.

“I’m proud of you,” she mouths. And I give her a subtle nod.

I stand and adjust my suit jacket. Slowly, I step forward and accept my father’s outstretched hand. He surprises me when he pulls me in for a hug instead of a handshake. “I’m so proud of you, Chase,” he whispers before pulling back and stepping over to the side, where he sits.

It takes me a moment to compose myself, while the board members all congratulate me.

I look past the table as everyone sits back down, and I lock eyes with Ella. She gives me a nod and an encouraging smile.



“You got this, Ace,” she mouths and I press my lips together to keep from smiling back at her. It’s time to share my new shoe idea which will hopefully expand our company and increase our market shares. I need to be serious and focused. A calm comes over me as I take over the meeting and I swear it has nothing to do with my confidence and everything to do with the beautiful blonde sitting across the room from me.

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Ella leans forward and kisses me. Her breasts press against my chest and my hands grab her ass, holding her tightly against me. After the board accepted my proposal, we wrapped up the meeting. We had to stay for formalities and some celebrations, but a few hours later, I whisked Ella away to my beach house. We’ve been making love for two hours. We’re both sweaty and tired, but also sated and happy.

“I’m so proud of you,” she says against my lips.

“Thank you. They loved your design work, Ella.” I pull back and look at her. “Come work for me.”

I’ve been thinking about it all week, but I didn’t want to scare her. She was so nervous about the presentation, but now I think she has the confidence. I’ve been watching her transform all week. We got the shoes appraised, but she didn’t want to sell them. Instead, a fashion museum has paid for the rights to show them for three years, which provided Ella enough money to finish her last class and start her own business. My legal team is also working to get her property back. But that will take longer.

“What?” she asks, staring at me with wide eyes.

“It was so great working together all week. You could be a permanent member of the Marino Shoe team,” I explain, the words tumbling out of my mouth.

“But I’m starting my *own* company,” she argues.

I press my forehead to hers. “I know, I just like seeing you all day, every day.”

She laughs. “I do too, but I won’t be far away. Greta offered to let me use some of her home as my office.”

My jaw clenches. I need her with me. I look around us. We’ve been splitting our time between my apartment at my parents’ home and my beach house. I like her in my space. I like her toothbrush on my bathroom counter. I like her shampoo and conditioner in my shower. I like her clothes in my drawers. “Fine. If you won’t work for me, then move in with me.”

Her head jerks back. “Chase, we just started dating for real. I think that is a little too fast.”

I reach up and cup her face. “Then, just bring some more things and we’ll see. We can make it a slow move-in process. Week by week. If I can’t have you with me all day, at least I can have you with me all night.”

“You already have that,” she argues.

“Let me take care of you,” I say as I feel her pulse race under my pinky finger that grazes her neck.

She’s quiet.

“Have I made Ella Foster speechless?” I ask.

She blushes.

“What happened to my girlfriend who was obsessed with all things love?”

“She’s right here,” Ella assures me. “She’s just...this is a lot.”

“Hey,” I start as I press a quick kiss to her lips, “keep the garage apartment. Hell, use that as your office. You can always move back in. But I hope you won’t.” I pause and search her eyes. “Ella?”

“What?” she whispers.

“I didn’t believe in insta-love or love at all until I met you. I thought I did when I was younger, but you showed me something more, so much more. This is the real deal.” I

motion between us. “This is forever, happily-ever-after shit, like all those movies you keep making me watch.”

She giggles and leans forward to rub her nose against mine. Her pussy grazes my semi-erect cock and I groan. “You know you love those movies,” she says as she purposefully glides across my growing erection.

“You’re killing me, Eleanor,” I moan.

She grabs a condom and rolls it down my length and then slowly sinks onto me.

“Don’t distract me with your magical pussy. I need an answer,” I grumble as my hands grip her hips.

She moves on top of me for a few seconds and then stops. Our gazes meet and I thrust inside her. Two can play at this game. Her eyes roll back in her head for a moment before she focuses on me once more.

“I’ll move in with you, under two conditions,” she says.

I don’t move. Hell, I don’t even breathe. “What are they?” I finally manage.

“We move out here permanently. No more splitting time between places. I want a home. A permanent home,” she adds.

“OK,” I agree. “And?” I can barely contain my excitement.

“No more faking anything, ever again,” she states.

I laugh and hold up my fingers in a Scout salute. “I promise that *we* will never fake anything ever again.” I stare at her raising an eyebrow.

She starts laughing and I feel her inner muscles around me. “I mean, if you’re doing everything you can, that should be acceptable.”

I thrust up and she moans. “Oh, princess, I promise I will always do everything I can when it comes to you.”

We’re both silent as she starts to move. We’re chasing our release and it’s too much to speak. It doesn’t take long before we’re both falling over the edge.

Ella screams my name and falls against me, her long hair splaying out over us like a blanket. I pull out of her and dispose of the condom, before quickly arranging her on top of me again.

“When should I move in?” she asks as she draws invisible lines on my chest with her finger.

“Tomorrow,” I announce.

She laughs. “Uh, I sort of need to pack.”

“I have people to do those things for you,” I state because it’s the truth.

She playfully slaps my chest. “Chase Giovanni Marino! We are not hiring people to pack my things.”

“Why not?” I ask. Because I was being completely serious.

“Because...there’s like personal stuff,” she stammers.

I’m confused for a moment, but when I glance down and see her pink cheeks, I chuckle.

“Personal stuff, huh?”

“Yeah.” She looks anywhere but at me, and I place a finger under her chin.

“Does the personal stuff vibrate?” I ask.

Her cheeks go from pink to red.

“Uh-huh, that’s what I thought,” I say with a smirk.

“You’re a pain in my ass,” she grumbles.

“I aim to serve, princess.”

She rolls off me and I look over to find her sprawled out, legs spread open, folds glistening. I lick my lips.

“Fine, then. I could use your services right now,” she says with her own smirk.

I crawl in between her legs and look up at her. “Like I said, princess. I aim”—I stop and lick her clit and she groans—“to serve.”

She opens her mouth to say something but only a moan comes out as I lap at her with my tongue, just the way I've learned she likes it. I can't wait to learn what else she likes.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Ella

“Uh, do you want to keep these?” Gus asks as he holds up my old cleaning gloves.

I laugh. “Nope. You can toss those.”

While technically I moved in with Chase a few weeks ago, I haven’t finished packing all my things yet. But since we’ve now been officially together for almost two months, I figured it was time. I turned in my last project for my independent research class and my professor basically said I was passing, so I am officially done with school.

Chase is making a big deal about it and forcing me to participate in the graduation ceremony in the spring. I wasn’t sure I wanted to, but Greta told me I’d regret it if I didn’t, and Gus said he’d never speak to me again if he wasn’t invited to a graduation ceremony. So, I guess that means I’ll be walking at graduation.

“How about this?” Gus asks, holding up a box containing various glasses that I seldom use.

“You can donate those,” I say, and I pause watching the box go into the donate pile. Six months ago, hell, three months ago, I would have never considered donating anything, even if I wasn’t using it all the time. I would have been too afraid that I might need it and wouldn’t be able to afford new ones. But now that my business is starting to take off, I could actually

afford new glasses, not that I need them since Chase's house already has a full set.

A knock on my door has us both looking up from our tasks.

"How's it going?" Greta asks.

"Almost done," I announce as I look around at the pile of boxes and bags. It's sadly not a ton of things, but they're all mine. And I remember how hard I worked for almost all of them.

"Chase has sent over a moving truck," Greta states. "They are pulling in now. Should I send them up?"

I laugh. "I don't need a whole moving truck. It'll fit in a few carloads," I explain as I motion around us.

Greta smirks. "Sweetie, your man has more money than sense. Let these nice young men take your boxes over to the house. And then you and I are going to work on figuring out paint colors for your new office."

I grin at that offer. Looking around, I imagine what my old apartment will be like as an office. I've already decided my bedroom will be my office. And the dining area will be a small conference area. And then my living space will have a giant worktable and screen for my laptop for when I want to collaborate or print things out and work on them.

"Stop it. I know you're undressing the apartment with your eyes," Gus teases.

Giggling, I turn back to him. "Shut it. I'm just thinking through my plans again."

"I still think you don't need a big working area. Just put in some pinball machines and a video game console," he says as he stands and pretends to play pinball in the corner. "See, it's like the perfect place for one."

"Great. Well, as soon as you start working for me, we'll talk about office changes," I say as I glare at him in pretend annoyance.

He throws his hands up defensively. “I mean, I’m just saying. Think about those big tech companies. You could even get one of those fancy sleep pods.”

“Gus, I’m literally just starting out. I don’t think fancy sleep pods are in my office budget.”

“They are if you want them to be,” a voice interrupts.

I look up and find Chase standing behind Greta.

I run over and jump into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist. “I didn’t know you were coming over.”

“I wanted to be here when the movers arrived. Everything packed?” he asks as he looks past me to take in the progress.

“Almost,” I answer.

He gives my ass a light slap. “Well, then put me to work. They are just getting the back of the truck open and will be up here in a minute.”

“I didn’t really need a moving truck,” I say to him.

He kisses me and lets me slide down his body slowly. “I know. But this will save us time for other more important tasks,” he says with a smirk and a wink.

“Get a room!” Gus yells from my little kitchen.

Chase and I grin at each other like silly teenagers caught in the act.

There’s a knock at the door and three young men enter. I slide down from Chase’s arms and give them directions on what’s going. They begin hauling things out, one by one, until my little apartment looks barren.

“Well, that’s a wrap,” Gus says with his hands on his hips as he surveys the few items I’ve left here for my future office.

Greta comes over and hugs me. “I’ll miss having you here all the time. But I’m so happy for you.”

I squeeze her back. “I’ll miss living here. But I’ll still be here for my office hours.”



She pulls back and gives me her patented warm smile that makes me feel like I have a family. “Of course you will.”

“Mr. Marino, sir, we’re all set,” one of the movers says from the doorway.

“We’ll be right behind you,” Chase replies. He looks over at me. “You ready?”

I take a deep breath and nod. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We all walk to the door, and I turn around after everyone has started down the steps. I stare at the empty space. I feel tears threaten at all the memories. This was my first place that felt like home after Nancy had moved us out of the only home I ever knew. I smirk as I remember seeing Nancy two days ago on Main Street. Chase’s arm was wrapped around mine and he stopped and said hello to her and then proceeded to tell her how excited he was that I was moving in with him.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing when her eyes nearly bulged out of her head. I haven’t heard from her or my stepsisters since then. And honestly, I’m making peace with us never having a close relationship, something I had yearned for up until I met Chase.

I look back down at my real family, the one I chose. Chase, Greta, and Gus all stand at the bottom of the steps waiting for me. They may not share my DNA, but they’re mine and I’m theirs.

“You coming?” Gus asks.

I nod and shut my door. Chase opens the car door for me, and I sit down, staring back at the garage apartment. It all feels so unreal.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” he says as he pulls us out of the driveway and follows the moving truck that is way too large for my needs.

I’m quiet as we drive out of the center of town toward the less congested beach area. “You OK over there?” Chase asks, grasping my hand in his. I can see Gus and Greta in the car behind us as I look at the side mirror.

I turn to Chase who's giving me a worried look.

"I'm fine. It's just a big day," I confess.

He squeezes my hand. "It *is* a big day." He smiles and brings my hand up to his lips. He plants a kiss on it and then settles it on his lap as he steers one-handed down the road.

The cliffy property comes into view and the moving truck turns onto the lane. We follow and I look at the new addition to his *tiny* house. His friend was able to quickly get some prefabricated work done off-site and just dropped the new addition off this week. It's growing and changing, just like us. His parents and nonno were surprised about the house when he showed it to them. But they've visited since then and seem to be getting used to the idea that he'll be staying out here now.

"Your tiny house isn't so tiny anymore," I state as Chase parks.

"Nope. But look at all those new rooms we have to christen," he says as he turns to me and smirks.

I roll my eyes. "You're impossible."

His smirk morphs into a giant grin. "And you wouldn't have it any other way."

"Probably not," I reply with a wink.

He laughs and I let him get out and open my door. He holds out his hand and I accept it. I hear Gus and Greta parking behind us, but my eyes are fixed on Chase.

He pulls me to him and wraps his big arms around me. "Hi," I say as he leans down and rests his forehead on mine, a move that's become familiar and comforting.

"Hi," he replies.

"So...this is really happening, huh," I muse.

"You aren't getting cold feet, are you?" he asks with a look of concern as he searches my eyes.

I giggle and shake my head a little. "No. I just can't believe this is all real."

“What’s all real?” he questions.

I pull back and motion to everything around us. “All of this.”

He leans back toward me and presses his lips to mine, and for a long moment, it’s just Chase and me, the rest of the world is a blur of activity, but I don’t see, hear, or feel it.

When we pull apart, I look up into his eyes and smile. “I never thought I’d get this.”

He laughs in confusion. “Get what, princess?”

“Get my happily ever after,” I reply with a smile as I stare into the eyes of the man I love, the man who loves me back, the man who’s so much better than I could have ever dreamed of or imagined. I guess dreams really do come true.

## EPILOGUE

Chase

“Fuck. Why am I so nervous?” I say to Laurel as I drive to meet Ella at the stables.

“Uh, because you’re about to propose to the woman you love?” she replies with an evil laugh.

“Very funny. You’re not even here for moral support,” I state.

“You don’t need moral support, asswipe,” Tate interjects.

Maybe three-way calling my brother and cousin was a bad idea for calming my nerves. Ella has met them both. We visited Tate two months ago and we went down to meet Laurel in St. Lucia just three weeks ago. Both trips ended with them telling me that I better not fuck it up.

“Are your parents excited?” Laurel asks.

“Laurel, do you even know your aunt and uncle?” Tate asks in a sarcastic tone.

“Fuck off, buttwipe. I *do* know them. They aren’t as awful as you both make them out to be. I mean, they could be worse, look at Ella’s stepmom,” Laurel points out.

“Touché,” Tate replies. “Talk about a royal bitch.”

“Tate!” I scold.

“What? She’s awful. I can’t believe Ella turned out as normal as she is,” Tate continues.

“OMG! Tate, shut the fuck up! I swear, you are such an ignoramus!” Laurel yells.

I pull down the long drive toward the stables. “Well, thanks for nothing, you two. I’m going to go find my lady and take her for a ride.”

They both bust out laughing and I realize my Freudian slip too late.

“I’m going,” I say through a clenched jaw.

“Good luck, dude!” Tate says.

“Go get me a female cousin!” Laurel yells before I hang up and park my car. I love them, but damn they are annoying at times. But as I open my car door, I can’t fight the twitch of my lips that begins to turn into a smile.

Ella’s new car is parked a few spots over. She fought me on that one. Her old one even had some name or something, but it was a freaking death trap. At least Gus helped me talk sense into her.

Ella comes out of the stable already riding Ridgely. “Took you long enough. We were getting restless, weren’t we?” she says, patting her horse.

Little does she know the surprises awaiting her. She looks happy, so much happier than the day I saw her with the vase. She officially graduated a month ago. I watched my woman walk across the stage and get her diploma and I’ve never been prouder in my life. Even her stepmom and stepsisters attended. However, I have a sneaking suspicion that was only because my mother and father were also there, and my mother was raving to everyone at the tennis club about how amazing Ella is and how her company is already doing so well. Ella was surprised to see her stepfamily, but they were polite and, of course, had excuses for not attending dinner afterward. Considering all the legal issues Nancy is facing now because of our little discovery about her fake trust, I’m surprised that she showed up and was, dare I say, pleasant. But I’m glad

she's been MIA lately. I think Nonno's words were the best said that day, "good riddance." Greta, Gus, and David all came along too, and I've never seen Ella so happy. I only hope I can make today rival that one.

"Rook is saddled already. He's waiting for you," Ella says as she motions with her head toward the stable.

"I'll be back in a moment," I say as I head inside and find Rook ready to go. I pat my pocket for the tenth time since I left my home office. "It's a big day today, buddy," I whisper as I place my foot in the stirrup and settle myself in the saddle. A stable hand comes over and I look down at him. "You know what to do?"

"Yes, sir," he says as he holds out his hand and I pull the small box from my pocket. He takes it.

"Hurry," I instruct and he nods as he runs off out of the back of the building.

I get myself situated and I nudge Rook who walks us out to meet Ella and Ridgely. "So tell me all about this new client," I say, trying to distract myself more than Ella.

Ella launches into her day, telling me all about her newest client. She's excited and I grin at her enthusiasm for her new project. She's an amazing designer. I've already hired her for the campaign for my next shoe release.

We guide the horses to our spot. The one by the pond where she can see the property where she grew up. We stop at the top of the hill and look out over the vista.

I glance behind us, making sure my plan is still on track. I smile as I see some familiar faces pop out from behind trees and then quickly hide again.

It's now or never, I think to myself. "Let's go sit on the bench," I suggest. I had a bench placed out here a few months ago and we've enjoyed many lazy days sitting and talking... along with some other activities.

She hops off Ridgely and takes a seat and I join her. "I have a few surprises for you," I start as I turn toward her.

“Oh?” she asks. I’m always trying to give her surprises because I love the look on her face. I love that I can bring her joy. I never want to stop making her smile. But I’m not sure how I’ll be topping today. Hell, I can barely contain my own smile.

Ella

Chase has something up his sleeve. I’ve guessed this since he made a request on such a random day to come out here. We normally have a routine. I’m wondering if it has to do with my parents’ property. I turn toward him.

He pulls a folded envelope out of his pocket and hands it to me. “Open it,” he whispers.

My hands tremble as I open the envelope and pull out a piece of paper. I read it twice to make sure I’m not hallucinating.

I look from the paper to Chase and back to the paper. “Is this...am I?” I stammer, unable to find the words.

“You’re the owner now,” he says.

“What?” I ask as I feel my eyes begin to fill with tears.

“Nancy decided not to fight it. She got a small parcel that your parents owned down the street. We found that with some digging around. I’m sure she’ll develop it at some point, but this”—he motions with his arms wide open—“is all yours, princess.”

“It is?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“Uh-huh,” he replies.

I launch myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I murmur as I pepper his face with kisses. He laughs and grabs my face, planting a firm kiss on my lips before pulling back.

“There’s more,” he says with a mischievous grin.

“What more could there possibly be?” I ask as I smile through my tears. I hear something. A deer?

“Look, Eleanor. Look who I found,” Chase says quietly in my ear as he presses a kiss to my wet cheek. I pull back and meet his eyes for a moment. He motions with a subtle nod, and I turn my head. I’m fairly certain my heart stops for a beat.

Running toward me is...Gunther.

“No. It’s not possible,” I say as I see my horse, my friend, the one who let me cry on him when my dad passed away, come running toward me.

He stops and nuzzles my outstretched hand. He jumps up a little, lifting his front legs, and then whinnies excitedly.

“Gunther?” I ask.

He whinnies again and I jump to my feet, throwing my arms around his neck, breathing in his scent, stroking his familiar coat.

“Oh my God,” I whisper as I start crying. “Gunther,” I manage as I pull back and take his head in my hands, planting kisses on his nose just as I did so many years ago. He’s older, just like me, but he’s no worse for wear.

“How?” I ask, not taking my eyes off my oldest and dearest friend.

“It wasn’t easy. He’s been sold twice. But I tracked him down. His owner was getting older, and when I offered a good price, he accepted it. He’s yours again, Eleanor,” Chase says as he stands and wraps his arms around me.

“Hi, Gunther,” he says, leaning his head forward so we’re cheek to cheek as we look up at my horse...*my horse*.

“I—I c-can’t believe you d-did this,” I manage as tears stream down my cheeks.

“I’d move the sun and moon for you, princess,” he assures me as he holds me tight. I remember being happy as a young girl. I remember bedtime stories with my dad. I have one or two fleeting memories of my mother, but I do remember feeling loved by her. I remember when my grandparents were



still alive and would come and we'd bake cookies. But I don't ever remember a day being this perfect.

"I don't think you can ever top these surprises," I whisper as I gain a little composure.

I pat Gunther again and notice there's a small red bow tied to his bridle. Something sparkles in it as the sun hits it. I frown and reach out, tugging at the bow. Suddenly a ring falls in my hand.

"What the..." I trail off as I study it.

Chase isn't holding me any longer. I slowly turn and find him kneeling before me.

"I don't know what I did to deserve you the first time you were in my life. And I certainly have no idea what I did to deserve you in my life a second time. You make me feel alive, Ella. You're the most amazing woman I've ever met. I don't think I knew what being happy was until I met you. You've taught me to love life, Ella. But mostly, I just love you. I want to be with you always. Every second we're together gets better and better. You're my best friend, my biggest supporter, and the person I want to spend forever with. I want to make our happily ever after official. Marry me, Eleanor Nadine Foster?"

I can barely see him through my tears. "Yes! Yes, of course!" I yell as I launch myself into his arms.

He kisses me with fervor, and I let myself disappear into a universe where only we exist. That is until I hear the hoots and hollers of our friends and family.

"I thought I told you two to get a room!" Gus yells.

"Congratulations!" Greta and Lorenzo say simultaneously.

I smile against Chase's lips and pull back, glancing behind him to see his parents, grandfather, Greta, Gus, Elisha, and David.

"How did you plan all of this?" I manage as my gaze goes back to his.

"Magic," he teases.

I give him a pointed look.

“Fairy dust?” he says with a laugh.

I give him a playful slap on his chest. “Seriously?” I giggle as I look down at the ring in my hand.

His gaze follows mine and he takes the ring, sliding it onto my finger.

“It’s official,” he says. “You’re mine, forever.”

I press my forehead to his. “I was already yours forever, Ace.” I look down at the ring. It’s perfect. I couldn’t have picked out a more perfect ring. “It’s beautiful.”

“It was Nonna’s,” he says as he places his hand over mine. I can feel his heart pounding and I can see everyone walking our way.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you more,” he replies as he leans in and kisses me once more. Gunther nuzzles my back along with Ridgely who’s walked over to us. I’ve never felt more loved in my life.

“I guess fairy tales are real,” I murmur against his lips.

“Ours is, princess, ours is,” he replies just as our friends and family descend upon us with hugs and congratulations. I know we aren’t married quite yet, but I’m pretty sure we’re about to live happily ever after.

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USA Today & International bestselling romance author, S.E. Rose lives near Washington D.C. with her family. When she's not wrangling her cats or keeping up with her kids, she's plotting her next story.

She loves all things wine, coffee, and cats. In her non-existent free time, she enjoys traveling, going to concerts, binging on her favorite shows, and reading, especially if it's a good mystery or comedy.

Learn more about upcoming books from S.E. Rose at [www.seroseauthor.com](http://www.seroseauthor.com).

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